

# Reading Hour

short fiction

poetry

essays

reviews

**Hiroshima**

G Karunakar

**Battle For Travancore**

Sreelata Menon

**The Idea Of Tragedy**

Manjushree Hegde

**Interview: Shinnie Antony**

## Stories / Poetry:

A P Govindankutty   Arha Padman   Chandrashekhar Sastry   Jyoti Joshi   Jyoti Singh  
Raghavendra Rao   Shawn Campbell   Shelton Pinheiro   Shivika Mathur   Shruti Rao  
Smitha Bhat   Vijayalakshmi Harish   Vivek Sharma   Zuzu Keller



Orchid bloom  
Photo: Sunil Parekh

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# Reading Hour

short fiction essays verse reviews

## Editorial

"They can't seize our monsoons, can they?" the Zamorin of Kozhikode had commented rather cockily when the Portuguese seized his tiny kingdom's pepper shipments mid-sea. The monsoons would come, he knew, every year, year after year. And they do; some years a little half-heartedly, some years in full exuberance. Alexander Frater described the monsoon as a troublesome relative about whom responsible family members constantly worry. Ancient Indian poets described the monsoon as an incorrigible womanizer who enjoyed his wife, the south, and then stole away, bearing her smell, to his paramour, the north. If we but allow ourselves, even the most prosaic among us can be moved to poetry by the rain. Its magic manages to evoke a myriad emotions in most of us. And how better to enjoy it than in the company of stories, of which we bring you a fine selection in this issue.

Speaking of stories, especially short stories, we interview Shinie Antony, the talented short story writer, novelist, and editor, who is also one of the people behind the Bangalore Literature Festival.

Sreelata Menon writes about a little kingdom – Travancore – that held out against the mighty Tipu Sultan in two battles, forcing him to retreat and eventually bringing to an end his reign over the Malabar.

6th August 2015 marked the 70th anniversary of the nuclear attack on Japan. G Karunakar describes his visit to Hiroshima, concluding that a trip to Japan would be incomplete without a visit to this historic site that continually reminds the world that some things should never happen again on earth.

In her essay, Manjushree Hegde explores what is tragedy, the temper of mind that perceives tragedy in life and the power to feel. And with Teachers' Day round the corner, retired teacher, Jyoti Joshi, shares her notes.

Happy reading.

~ Editors

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Inside Cover Photo: Sunil Parekh

# FICTION

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## One Cold Night

Jyoti Singh

Jyoti is a screenwriter based out of Mumbai. She enjoys photography, travelling and writing. Sometimes she even gets paid to do so.

The car's headlights worked in vain against the thickest fog the season had seen. Children of the pavements cuddled together in one corner in a heap. The cars of the city's rich zoomed past. I was not drunk enough, not as compared to the other nights, not like those nights had demanded.

I hadn't known these kids very long, but they were the only people I knew in the city that night – a bunch of high school kids awaiting the transition to college. Saying they were drunk would be understating it. They weren't people any more. They were like blind pet dogs. The driver was from my part of the world, I guessed. If he weren't employed by one of their parents (I didn't know whose), he would have spat on them. He had a familiar disgusted air about him. I asked him if he was sure he could drive. It was a five minute drive, two rights and one round about. Sure, he could manage that! Being a non-driver, I didn't argue. About fifteen minutes later, we arrived. With the help of the driver, I dragged all five, one by one, into a large bedroom.

He said if I didn't mind, he'd like to stay until one of them woke up and he could be relieved, or until their parents came in the morning. It wasn't my house,

but I said yes anyway.

It could have been the presence of a stranger in a strange house; I thought I was better off awake and I decided to stay up. Or maybe, if there was to be a tomorrow, I wanted to see it come in. After all, I was nursing my first broken heart that nomadic winter, and landing up anywhere I was remotely invited. College was shut and friends were gone. I had decided to lurk around and skip home.

Two minutes of silence and then he got up and left without a word. I didn't know whether he was coming back. My senses bristled. I started hearing sounds that had not been audible before. I had never shared silence with a man like him: dark-skinned, well-built, a blue-collar village migrant in a big city. A driver who back home would be a small time seasonal farmer. The awareness of our differences pulsed at the back of my right ear. I sat slightly at an angle so I could see him if he walked back in through the door. Five minutes later, he reappeared with tea in two plastic cups.

Sitting in the balcony overlooking a hopeful, dimly lit tea stall that I hadn't noticed before, I learnt that his name was Janta and that he was from a village close to my grandmother's birthplace (a

fact that surprised him, but I'd guessed right). Now he spoke to me in the familiar tone that a sense of tribalism induces in people. He must have been just three years older than me, though he looked a decade older. He had a baby boy, a wife, perhaps younger than I was, and a younger brother who kept it all together back home while he made a living away. He was leaving for his village the next day, by the 8 a.m. Gorakhpur Express. This was his last night on the job. So, a holiday, I thought. To him, however, holidays meant days between an old job and a new one. That's how he had lived and worked for years. All this information was volunteered. Then there was a silence which I took it upon myself to fill. I asked my first question in an attempt to show interest and to keep him from asking any. Was there something important that he had to go visit his folks for? He told me that his wife had given birth to a stillborn child fifteen days ago, a baby girl. Fully aware that insincerity in one's mother tongue does not work, I was still struggling with an inept translation, when he told me there was another matter as well, an important one. Childbirth was a practical matter, not emotional, I understood. He had a court hearing to attend and his presence was imperative, for they expected a judgement.

"You see, they've accused me of murder," he said. I held my face as it was for the two minutes or so that he took to explain an age-old neighbourly fight about property. It had all started forty years ago when his father, as a young boy, threw bits of roti in the contentious strip

of land which was part of his neighbours' property thanks to his grandfather's benignity. They raised a big hue and cry about the roti and his family decided to go to court for the piece of land.

"My grandfather was a generous man, but petty people saw this as a sign of weakness. Finally, he had to resort to the courts and he wasn't very happy doing so. So that's when it all started." He looked up and asked, "Are you hungry?"

I unfroze my face and muttered something between yes and no. He picked yes and walked to the kitchen. It was 3 a.m. I sat where I was, reassuring myself with the operative word 'accused'. A few minutes later, I was served a tomato-onion omelette sprinkled with more green chilies than I could handle. By then, I knew better than to displease him. I reminded myself of the boarding school warden who used to say, if it's on your plate, it's edible!

"You must be wondering if my employers know?"

Was that what I was wondering? Sure, I nodded a yes and a no. He picked yes again.

"You see, they don't have a witness; it can go on forever. How do you expect a man to earn a living if he goes around announcing he is awaiting a decision on murder?"

I wanted to lift the tea cup to my face and hide behind it. I couldn't. It was the first time I realized how naked our eyes are.

"This man, my neighbour's son – he is older than me – at the break of dawn, he used to bathe at his well. The well overlooks our boundary. One afternoon,



he was found in it. I had only come back home the day before, after a year. I was driving a tempo for a trader in Ghaziabad at the time," he stopped. Silence. I again looked at the tea cup for rescue.

"My brother manages all that, he pays all the fees. I am lucky. In this day and age, which brother does that? My father was full of stories of how brothers kill one another over property. Perhaps he told us these stories as deterrence. We grew up thick." He stopped. "I love my brother," he said, a little desperately. "Tell me what are you doing with this lot?"

I knew this was coming. Perhaps people were closer in origin than apart in class. After all, I was just two generations removed from his village. Unlike the company I kept, to him, I was very conspicuous in my otherness.

"These people with their incessant Thank you's and Sorry's! I've heard it when I hold it for him while he pees, inebriated, and when she waits in the car having worn the wrong shoes while I fetch her the right ones." He took my empty tea cup and slid both to a corner. "There used to be a Zamindar whose fields my father ploughed. He succumbed to throat cancer, but nobody ever saw him so much as cough." His eyed glowed with pride. "Then there is this lot, showering around this sham respect. I wish they kept some of it for themselves."

He seemed to hold the modern world of western Indianism in some distaste.

"What kind of people are these? They go to parties leaving their kids behind on their own to have their own party. Living in mutual inconvenience! These are not

real families." He was quite worked up. "They have no clue what some people have done for their families." He rubbed his palms together, not because of any outside cold but perhaps the chill within. He stayed quiet for a while.

"Do you think your own blood can betray you?" I repeated my yes and no routine on which I had survived so far. He picked no this time. "That's what I think!" He paused to catch a breath. "He would still be alive, that man, had he not said such vile things about my family. I don't think much of women. They make men weak. My wife is just a woman... But I love my brother."

His love for his brother had become a plea now, but my hackles had risen before that. From "did he" I'd begun to wonder "would he". Fear of physical danger had transformed into a more palpable one, sexual. I started imagining a bathroom somewhere to lock myself into. The sky had turned blue with some grey flakes. Soon it'll be morning, I told myself and breathed.

"Prison would at least put an end to this," he continued, completely unaware of me. I braved a look at his face. "This life of humiliation." This was the most confused the 21 year-old me had ever been. His eyes were moist and distant. He didn't make any attempt to hide anything. He sat there, crying, hands on his knees, like he was tired. I had never seen a grown man cry before. It filled me with another kind of fear, a fear I had battled before, an ashamed fear. How could have I feared a pathetic man like him? I relaxed my spine.

"Lies make it easy to get by." He wasn't

talking to me anymore. He was alone. "Truth sits like a snake in your gut, coiling and uncoiling. Not even the gods can free us from the truth."

Within seconds, the air turned yellow; first the crows acknowledged it and then the sparrows. Rain followed as though someone had uncorked the clouds by accident. I pulled myself from the balcony to the doorway. He didn't. Morning azaan and the first rays of the sun and the honking from the masters of the house, all coincided in an announcement of sorts. Tomorrow had come all at once, in a rush. It felt like a lot was going to happen and yet, if nothing happened, no one was going to feel cheated. For a night so heavy with possibilities, the day itself was the promise.

He picked up an airbag tucked behind the door. It had been there all night, and I hadn't noticed it. He slung it on his shoulder. Perhaps it was the rain, or the daylight, or his tears, but his face seemed different now. His eyes less intense and his lips parted harmlessly. He looked like a man all ready to go nowhere, holding a ticket without a destination stamp.

The masters walked up. He gave the car key to the madam. She was surprised to see him there, "Oh, you didn't have to

wait for us! But thank you, Janta."

I looked closely, he didn't wince. Sir and madam smiled at him. He looked at me wordlessly in goodbye. Something of a nod and something of a wave of his hand, and he was gone. One of the kids had just woken up and walked into the living room. Sir and madam got busy with making much of the baby. I said my goodbyes. They asked me to wait for breakfast. I told them I had an early class. They asked the baby who I was. He did not know me and mumbled, "A friend of a friend." I didn't elaborate.

I walked to the bus stop, then looked at my wallet and hailed an auto-rickshaw. I wasn't in a mood to fight the molesters on the bus. Some days I just wasn't. I switched on my phone.

On my way back, still mulling the strange few hours I'd spent in the balcony-turned-confessional, I kept spotting men like Janta, hundreds of them, invisible in the cityscape, submerged in stories of home and away, us and them, honour and shame, now and back when.

At some point when I was nearing the campus, my phone rang. My mother asked me where I had been. She insisted on the truth. I hung up. I wasn't interested in truth.

— ■ —  
"A lie can travel halfway around the world while truth is putting on its shoes."

~ Anon.

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# FICTION

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## Rebellion

Arha Padman

The letter from her father lay on the veranda, despite her repeated requests to the postman to use the mailbox. When Shanti picked it up, it was warm from the sun soaked tiles. She thought of the cold silences that filled their Sunday afternoon calls. The telephone in her Bangalore home rang every Sunday afternoon; it had done so every Sunday of her married life, every Sunday for the past eight years. In the early years of her marriage, Shanti had longed for the call. She'd wash the lunch dishes and put them away, close the bedroom door where Karthik napped, and wait for the phone to ring. She'd speak for hours to her mother, sacred hours of secrets, sorrows, gossip and laughter.

Had the phone calls ceased after her mother's death, Shanti would have cherished the memory of them. But Retired Colonel Rajashekar followed the drill meticulously. The calls were now brief, painful, but always on time. Shanti spent her Sunday mornings hoping the phone wouldn't ring.

Shanti ran a finger across the curvy scribble on the envelope before opening it. She admired its illegibility, its incorrigibility. His handwriting was the only thing her father had failed to

Arha is a media professional and a reckless dreamer with a passion for writing and cinema.

discipline.

As she opened the letter, Shanti tried to remember when her father had made her smile. Her mind sifted through random memories. Maybe this letter would be the first.

Dear Shanti,

I am remarrying. Her name is Netra; she is a widow. She has a daughter, Tara, who is fifteen. I am convinced that this is the right thing to do.

Regards,

Appa

Karthik came back from work later than usual. He tossed his laptop bag on the sofa and sat down at the dining table. Shanti went to the kitchen, barely acknowledging him, and came out with a cup of tea.

"So what if I don't get a smile, I get my tea without asking," he said, grinning.

Karthik was always saying things like that. Shanti never understood any of it, but she knew just how to react. She grinned back, sat down next to him, and watched him sip his tea noisily.

"Appa is getting married again," she blurted out.

Karthik lifted his head from the cup.

Shanti held out the letter with the expectant look of a child exposing the

mischievous of a playmate. She watched him as he took the envelope from her hands, opened it, and read the letter. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. She waited for him to take it all in and explode. She imagined him tearing the letter, tossing the shreds in the air and telling her, "This is unacceptable, Shanti. We have to stop this."

Shanti tried to hide the smile threatening to curve her lips as she imagined this. They would be a team, Karthik and she, and together they would wage a war against Appa.

Karthik opened his eyes, gulped down the tea and placed the letter on the table.

"He seems to have made up his mind," he said.

He got up and started walking to their bedroom, mumbling something about the office chair and a bad back.

"Will you talk to him?" Shanti raised her voice to be heard. Not used to raising her voice, most of the words drowned in a tremble.

"He is old and living alone. He needs a companion. When was the last time you visited him anyway? Wake me up for dinner." Karthik said, before he shut the bedroom door behind him.

Her eyes were tired and puffy from studying all week. She tried hard to fight the drowsiness. One more exam, and she would graduate. Then she would get a job and move far away from home.

"Shanti! To the living room at once!" Appa's voice sent a small jolt through her body. She jumped up, dropping her pen and textbook. She did not have time to pick them up. The order was loud and

clear. To the living room at once!

Shanti stood in front of Appa, too scared to look him in the eye.

"A good proposal has come. Good family. The boy is a Software engineer in Bangalore. I saw the photograph. Nice gentleman, name is Karthik. I have decided this is best for you," Appa said.

Shanti felt like someone pulled away the ground from under her feet.

"But my exams..."

Amma shook her head frantically, signalling her to stop.

"Go now and study for the exam. They will come to see you the day after. We will fix the date then. Don't fail the paper and cause me embarrassment," Appa said.

Shanti asked the stewardess for another glass of lemonade. She did not know if the queasy feeling was due to motion sickness or the thought of confronting Appa. For now, the lemonade helped. She clutched the letter in her hands. She had read it at least ten times since boarding. Each time she read it, its terseness bothered her. He had made his decision, not asked for her opinion. He had decided to replace her mother with another woman without consulting her. She felt a hot flush on her face; the lemonade had stopped working. She dashed to the toilet.

"This is your admission order for Bachelor of Commerce at St. Stephens College. I went through a lot of trouble to get that. Your low marks in Maths did not help."

"Appa, I am bad at Maths. I cannot do Commerce," Shanti said, sobbing hopelessly.

“Let her do BA in English. She is the school topper in English,” Amma came to her rescue.

Appa gave Amma a fierce look, “Meenaxi, fetch me a glass of water.”

He turned to Shanti, “Commerce at St. Stephens. I do not take decisions without thinking them through. I know what is best for you. Now go practise Maths before college starts next month.”

Shanti rolled down the window of the taxi she had hailed at Chennai airport, and watched the clear turquoise sky unmarred by clouds – a perfect day for a new beginning. Today, she would fight for her past, for twenty-eight years of suppression. She remembered a line from the leather bound copy of *The Art of War* that decorated Appa’s shelf in the study, “Though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.” She had delayed long enough. Shanti ran over the possible scenarios once again in her mind as the taxi pulled up in front of her Appa’s home, her home, her Amma’s home; their territory, to be protected from encroachment.

Shanti sat on the sofa opposite her father and Netra. With her long black plait flipped to the front, Netra resembled a movie star from the 50s. Her pink and white cotton sari was draped neatly around her slim body. She looked young, barely in her late 30s. Thin black lines of Kohl lined her large eyes, which glinted with hope and an erstwhile grief. She was beautiful. Shanti averted her eyes before Netra could notice that she was staring.

“The registration is next month, on the

28th. We appreciate your coming all the way to meet us,” Appa said.

She had been preparing for this moment for the past four days; when she was cooking, or packing Karthik’s lunch, or sorting the laundry, dusting the living room. She had carefully chosen the words, practised and perfected her attack several times in front of the mirror.

She opened her mouth now, to unleash the planned speech but found herself managing only a smile. She had blown her first chance. She sipped some of the tea. Watery, she thought, but anything to calm her nerves.

“Try some. I baked them especially for you,” Netra said, gesturing gracefully towards the plate of yellow tea cakes.

I don’t want your cake. I did not come here to eat your cake. You cannot just walk into my mother’s kitchen and bake your cake. I will not let this marriage happen.

As she took the first bite, Shanti thought of all the things she could have said. She had wasted yet another chance.

“She is a wonderful cook,” Appa said, beaming.

Shanti took a bigger bite of the cake and a large gulp of tea to swallow it, almost choking herself. She began to feel an urgent desire to leave the room. Sitting there, hearing Appa’s voice, she felt an old familiar fear overtaking her, weakening her resolve. She was retreating like a coward before the battle had even begun. Maybe she was meant to be a coward and cowards should never try to be heroes. She should be at her apartment, washing those bedroom curtains; she had been putting it off for weeks. Shanti felt the

queasiness return. She got up and began to take leave hurriedly.

"You are leaving? But I thought your flight wasn't until evening," Netra said.

Shanti was in no mood to explain. All she could think of was getting away.

"Don't be silly, Shanti. Sit down. You cannot just storm out like that. You have been here barely fifteen minutes. At least meet Tara," Appa said.

Tara? It took a moment for Shanti to realise who her father was talking about.

"I will call her," Netra volunteered and disappeared inside.

"What is wrong with you? Is this the way to behave?" Appa said, not hiding his irritation.

Shanti sat down on the sofa, feeling trapped in that living room. She cursed the moment she had decided to come.

Netra emerged from the bedroom across the living room, smiling. Shanti's eyes searched for Tara. She saw a tall, lean girl, frizzy hair tied up neatly in a ponytail, holding her mother's elbow and reluctantly following her.

"Ah, Tara, child, come here and meet your sister, Shanti," said Appa.

Tara looked at Netra, who nodded her head and gave a signal to go ahead. Tara walked slowly from across the room and sat on the sofa next to Appa.

"Say hello to Shanti-akka and ask her how she is doing," Appa instructed Tara.

Tara extended her hand and repeated, "Hello Shanti akka. How are you?"

Shanti took Tara's frigid hand in hers and answered, "I'm fine, thank you."

Appa watched proudly, as his children performed their parts as instructed.

Shanti watched Tara, as the girl sat there, fiddling with the frills on her skirt. Appa rambled on about the wedding preparations. This frightened creature was going to be her sister in a few weeks. Shanti wondered if Tara knew how much her life was going to change soon. She couldn't see much of Netra in her; maybe she looked like her father. A little girl who had lost her father, who will soon get a new one. For the first time since receiving the letter, Shanti realised that she was an insignificant detail in her father's new marriage.

Was that a hint of a smile spreading on the tiny, sulking face? Shanti watched as Tara's eyes spotted the plate of yellow tea cakes on the table. Artlessly, the girl leaned forward and picked up a tea cake.

"No! Put that right back," Appa roared.

Shanti gasped and Netra started up from her chair.

"How many times do I have to teach you table manners," Appa's voice got even louder as he reprimanded Tara.

Clearly struggling to control her tears, Tara placed the cake back in the plate and attempted to apologise.

"Don't cry, Tara. Now go and wash your face," Appa said.

Shanti watched as Tara got up and walked away. She felt like she was reliving a memory from her childhood, only this time, little helpless Shanti was being played by little helpless Tara; and helpless she would remain, unless... Shanti knew that it was time to break her silence. She took a deep breath and let all the fear escape her body as she prepared for her first rebellion.

# FIRST PERSON

## Notes From A Teacher

Jyoti Joshi

Jyoti, one time teacher, indulges the teacher's favoured pastime of 'dispensing wisdom' on the advent of Teachers' Day!

Live a life you remember!  
– says a caption.  
Isn't that exactly right?  
We remember a day  
that is bright and sunny  
or even rainy or cold –  
because it is one lived with meaning.

For my loved ones:  
Always try to be exactly  
who you are; little ones.  
Never any less.  
It is easy to pretend  
to be more than who  
you really are...  
Better not to go that way. For it is slippery, and shoddy.  
When really, you are  
truly fine to be just you.

Our minds and hearts  
make us tick with the world.  
Which do you think is worse?  
– the empty mind or  
– the empty heart?  
For I cannot tell.

'Patience' is a word that is  
difficult to learn  
Hard to keep or be when young.  
Even though – by and by  
Life makes you learn it.

In areas of dense population  
TV antennas sprout  
on tops of buildings  
to entertain people –  
In ugly mazes of wires  
that silence birds.

The word 'short  
or 'brief'  
has more letters than  
'long' – that's English  
for you!

Water always flows down a slope.  
Adults might run on tracks outdoors or in;  
...for their own health  
– but not helter skelter  
the way of a child; sometimes... just because...  
even around a classroom... well... why not?  
P.S. (Do ask your class teacher before you do that.)

The mind leaves behind  
a body that is as alive  
as the shell  
of walnut without kernel.

# LIGHT STUFF

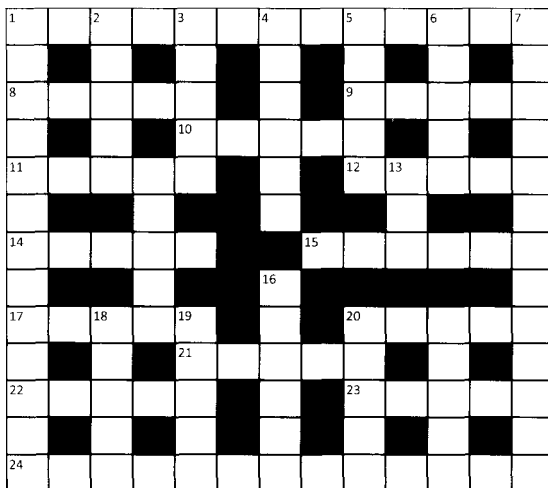
## Cryptic Crossword

### Across

1. A stance after kiss replaced some sorrow in fair, for an overlap (13)
8. Mark road with a politician (5)
9. Playwright at home holds stock exchange (5)
10. See network inside, plain in Spanish America (5)
11. Son is girl? (5)
13. Encountered Ron briefly in city (5)
16. Fill claim depressed without a bit left (5)
16. Boost to man, I heard (6)
18. Somewhat clever to go along (5)
21. Constant distances from the centre (5)
23. Stir right river! (5)
24. Man followed by a girl (5)
25. Man is a backward traveller (5)

### Down

1. Excuse? Fair, one story holds start of another (13)
2. Movie rating beams transparencies (5)
3. Enough! Tree is mutilated (5)
4. Part of animal a delicacy (6)
5. One chant follows name as a figure of speech (5)
6. Home group contained within (5)
7. French refusal to confusedly accomplish without silence



- limits of naive divergence (13)
12. Animal in back shadow (3)
14. Disarrange to turn left within points (6)
17. Ruffle confused lout with directions (6)
19. Repeat a profit (5)
20. Characteristic of confused abstainer Ira! (5)
21. Colour tag made again (5)
22. Devil starts devouring some lemon (5)

Solution: Page 48

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# ESSAY

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## Hiroshima

G Karunakar

An inveterate traveller, retired lawyer Karunakar, enjoys documenting his visits to different countries of the world.

Photographs: G Karunakar

Twenty-seven years after my first visit to Japan, I decided on a second trip to the elegant Kansai region, the place to see and understand what Japan is all about. I planned to spend five days at Kyoto, followed by three days at Hiroshima and five days at Osaka; Kyoto and Osaka would be my hubs to visit nearby places of interest.

The former capital of Japan, Kyoto, is the storehouse of traditional Japanese culture with its 17 UNESCO World Heritage sites, innumerable temples and ancient relics. The extensive Japan Rail (JR) known for its speed, efficiency and coverage, offers a variety of JR passes to tourists for multiple and long distance routes that are convenient and cost effective. I opted for a JR west rail pass valid for seven days, and costing 20,000 Yen.

After my sojourn of five days in Kyoto and its surroundings, I boarded the Shinkansen Bullet train and was in Hiroshima in two hours, covering a distance of more than 300 kms. My reserved accommodation was at a hotel near the Peace memorial Park. Among the modes of local transport in Hiroshima, the most popular is the tram, and there

was a halt just at the doorstep of my hotel. I had not imagined Hiroshima to be such a well-laid out, beautiful city. The roads, buildings, trams, buses are all of a high standard and have been raised from the debris of total destruction in a span of six decades; it is a real tribute to the strong willed Japanese.

Hiroshima, the small, beautiful city that was unknown to the world till the nuclear bombing of 1945, lies on the delta formed by the Ota-gawa River, facing Seto Island Sea (Hiro – broad, shima – island). The Ota-gawa runs through the city along with its six tributaries, dividing Hiroshima into several islets. Tourists come here mainly to view the Peace memorial and the nearby Miyajima Island.

6th August, 2015, marked 70 years since the gruesome nuclear attack on Hiroshima, followed three days later by one on Nagasaki. The dropping of the atom bombs – ‘Little Boy’ on Hiroshima and ‘Fat Boy’ on Nagasaki – by the USA in 1945 has been the only instance of nuclear weapon deployment for warfare in the course of history. Out of the 246,000 people dead, half that number perished on the very day of the bombing and the other half due to radiation and



compounded illnesses in due course. The bombing ended World War II and Japan surrendered two weeks later.

Hiroshima was targeted on account of its industrial and military proximity; its Castle was the Headquarters of crash units and the logistics base for the Japanese Military. The affluent city of 350,000 was the primary target of the drop that devastated 12 square kilometers and 75% of the buildings. Over 90% of the doctors and medical staff that lived in the City perished, crippling help at the hour of need.

The Peace Memorial, located in an expansive park of 120,000 square metres is dedicated to the memory of the victims of the atomic bomb explosion of 6th August 1945. It is now designated as a symbol of world peace. I set aside parts of three days for a leisurely study of all the monuments.

The most notable monument of all is the 'A Bomb Dome' along the river. Before the bombing, the present Peace Park area was a flourishing commercial centre and an affluent residential area interconnected by a bridge. This area was the target point for the American B-29 Bomber to drop Little Boy. The bomb razed to the ground all the buildings and structures within a 12-kilometre radius and instantly killed 140,000 citizens. The damaged A Bomb Dome, which was the City Industrial Promotion Hall of the then prefecture, survived the catastrophe and the skeleton structure still stands, a mute symbol of devastation, for the last seven decades. The building and its debris, preserved for posterity, are now fenced around to protect them from

vandalism.

I was told that the city still has 60,000 survivors (all over the age of 80) who recollect gory incidents of the day of the bombing and narrate the sufferings of the victims. I saw many such testimonies in the Memorial Museum.

The first monument that caught my eye on entering the Park was a saddle shaped Cenotaph built in the memory of 200,000 victims of bombing. Below the Cenotaph (an empty tomb erected in honour of persons whose remains are elsewhere) lies buried a register of names of victims. A little further is the eternal flame lit in 1964, to be extinguished only on the destruction of all nuclear weapons on earth, and when the planet is free of nuclear threat. Looking at the flame, I wondered if it would ever be allowed to go out.

I walked a little further to see a very elegant monument in the shape of an eggshell with the statue of a small girl on top of it, with her hands above her head, holding a symbolic crane (Japan's sacred bird). I was standing at a distance to get a clear photograph of the monument since many school children had collected around it to place brightly coloured paper cranes there. I picked up a conversation with their teacher, who was standing next to me, about the paper cranes. It was good that I spoke to him, otherwise I might only have a few pictures of the place and not its significance. He narrated the story of the monument – it was built in memory of a child named Sadako Sasaki (the image on top of the monument), who survived the bombing at the age of two and died ten years later due to the



Clockwise from top right:  
Ruined 'A' Bomb Dome  
Hiroshima Castle  
Peace Bell  
Children's Memorial



Clockwise from top:

Hiroshima: Ruined dome and modern buildings

From museum: depiction of radiation effects

Central Cenotaph



Opposite page:

Left: Spiral Clock

Right: Ruined Hiroshima (picture in museum)



effects of radiation. Two months before her death, while she was in hospital, her friends told her to fold 1000 paper cranes, to help her recover from illness. She died while folding the 644th paper crane. The sad story of Sadako is told in all primary schools in Japan. The memorial was built in her memory with the funds raised by children. From the initiation of the tower until the present, over 10 million paper cranes have been placed therein. The glass cases around the monument are now filled to the brim with paper cranes. On hearing the story, I was speechless for quite some time. The children left the area and I went around the monument to view the commemorative plaques in Japanese. I picked up a paper crane and found it to be tear-proof, long-lasting.

A little way away was the Memorial Mound. The nuclear explosion had caused instant charring of thousands of bodies beyond recognition. Ashes of 70,000 such unidentified bodies were scooped together into the Mound, now covered with grass and flowers.

Further on, near the other end of the Park, is the Peace Bell. Embossed on the bell is a World map without national boundaries marked, and an Atom symbol at the point where the log strikes it. Along the rim is an inscription in Greek (translating to 'Know yourself'), with Japanese and Sanskrit translations.

Near the Bell is a spiralled Clock tower with a three-face clock. I was told that the clock chimes a melody every day at 8.15 in the morning to mark the time of the explosion.

I relaxed on the reclining bench facing the River, gazing at the flawless stainless steel fabrication that held the clock and the reflection of the Atom Bomb Dome in the still water. After resting a while, I walked over the iconic T-shaped Aioi Bridge across the river (Aioi, easily visible from the air, was the target of the bombing), to board a bus to the Station for a quick lunch and a trip to Miyajima Island.

Hiroshima Castle, an imposing 40 metres high structure, is a designated

historic site, the original castle having been built in the 16th century. The tower of the castle was destroyed by the 1945 atomic bomb blast but stands restored to its former glory now. At the fifth level of the castle is the observation platform, while other floors exhibit displays on Hiroshima's history and culture. I climbed to the viewing gallery on the fifth floor for a panoramic view of the city.

When I came to the Peace Memorial Museum after the Castle visit, I had a little over an hour to go around. This museum is the most visited site by World tourists for its information, pictures and memorabilia of the bombing. The material on display at the two wings of the building is very disturbing, and serves as a grim reminder that peace can never be taken for granted. The exhibits, several portraying damages to people and buildings, the after-shock of the blast and damages by radiation, moved me. The damaged personal effects on display reminded me of the exhibits at the UN General Assembly Hall and the Holocaust museum of Jerusalem. On display also are details of nuclear

warheads in the possession of various countries and ongoing efforts for their dismantlement to ensure International Peace. The several statues dotting the periphery of the museum remind viewers of the need for a war-free World.

Every August 6th, thousands of people gather at this memorial park to join in the inter-faith religious services to commemorate the anniversary of the bombing.

Hiroshima keeps sending a message to the world that there are things like this which should never happen again on earth. It is my candid opinion that a trip to Japan is incomplete without a visit to Hiroshima.

Holidaying in Japan is always incredible. The 'Land of the Rising Sun' abounds in scenic landscapes, mountains, fresh air, beautiful clean cities, smooth-as-clockwork transport and courteous, friendly people. Add to this the charm of the blooming Sakura (Cherry Blossom) all over the country during the spring season, and your holiday becomes unforgettable indeed.

"If the radiance of a thousand suns  
Were to burst at once into the sky  
That would be like the splendour of the Mighty One...  
I am become Death,  
The shatterer of worlds."

[Quoted from the Bhagavad Gita after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki]  
J. Robert Oppenheimer



# FICTION

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## Mitti Ka Attar

Smitha Bhat

The joy of cycling to work is a prelude to the happiness of my busy, useful, hard working day. I revel in the feeling of my legs moving, the warm breeze gentle on my face, and Rashid Khan singing Raag Yaman on my iPod as I speed to my office.

“Walking into this space makes me feel calm and energized all at the same time,” one of our clients used to say. “Isn’t that strange?”

Not strange, just very thoughtfully designed, I thought with an inward smile, as I walked into the small office, looking forward to the day ahead of me. The Gayatri mantra playing softly on an endless loop, the dark blue walls, the scent of jasmine... everything had been planned, but planned so carefully – it looked like a serendipitous falling together of space and objects and light – to create joy.

I turned on my Mac and started dealing with emails, bills, and the dozen small tasks of a business built with much love, a lot of hard work, and little money. There was a mail from Vivek, my partner and co-founder of Pravartana, our brainchild, our business. He was in Germany, doing a course on water management in third world countries.

Smitha spends her life treating patients and teaching students, but she is willing to give up all that if someone gives her a job as a travel writer!

I read the mail eagerly, and then sat back blankly, trying to understand.

“I know you will understand, Radha, it is just such a good opportunity – how can I say no? And now, Malathi is pregnant – we have more responsibilities. This country has everything going for it.”

“How can I come back to the dirt of the streets, the power cuts, the bureaucracy that has to be bribed at every new step we take? I know we promised to give our best to the country – but the truth is, Radha, the country does not deserve us. It does not, my dear.”

A small postscript showed me that Vivek was still my Vivek – idealistic, driven, motivated, and that this decision was torturing him. “Forgive me, Radha. I just cannot come back.”

I walked to the pantry, made myself a cup of tea, and tried not to scream out loud at Vivek’s perfidy. Did they mean so little to him? Our plans? Our promises?

I stared listlessly out of the window at the dull torpor of summer on the street below. This last week, the heat had been unbearable, with so many false promises of rain.

But now suddenly, the sky darkened and the world became quiet. Grey clouds, interrupted by sparks of lightning, rolled down to the accompaniment of

the drumbeat of thunder. A cold, rain-touched breeze slid into the room. A stray fragrance crept up my nostrils – petrichor! I laughed and looked to the sky, now the colour of gunmetal, and ran out to the terrace into the rain. I turned my face to the clouds and savoured the taste and feel and fragrance of this gift, this first shower. As I swirled in the rain, I thought about Vivek and our first monsoon together.

We were standing together in the dusty old corridor of our college, oblivious of students jostling to see the notice board and the scores of our first semester exams. Our seniors had informed us that good first year marks were very important to get in to good universities in the US, and of course the US was the promised land for so many of the students in my class.

“Hi, I’m Vivek.”

“Radha,” I said, shaking my head at the desperation of the students as they tried to see their marks.

“Not one of them is aware that it’s raining. This is one of the gifts of being alive, of being in India – the fragrance of the first rain.” Vivek said, closing his eyes and breathing in deeply. I looked at him with delight – had I finally found a friend in this class of harried, driven, competitive students?

“Would you like a cup of tea?” he asked. I nodded, and we ran down to the canteen, getting soaked, but not really minding.

And now I am getting wet in another shower, many years in the future, remembering... that cup of shared tea (we were counting pennies, both of

us) was the first of many together, and we became best friends. We shared a sense of the ridiculous, were impatient of pretension, and to tell the truth, we weren’t very ambitious. We wanted to work, but for the joy of it, not for a house in the American suburbs with 2 SUVs and a heated swimming pool as the ultimate goal. Life in engineering college became so much happier once I had a friend who got what I meant, who didn’t have that eyebrows raised – ‘Are you nuts?’ – expression that my friends and family habitually wore when I interacted with them.

One Friday evening, we were sitting with our gang in the college canteen, sharing tea. Our classmate, Rajesh, said, “The NSS is organizing a trip to Kodiginahalli next week. I think we should go.” I was surprised. Rajesh was someone who had a very firm career plan, and that plan involved becoming rich, becoming famous, and going to the US as soon as he possibly could. Visiting an impoverished village was a little atypical. I raised my eyebrows in inquiry.

“You know, it’ll look good on my resume.”

So that’s how we ended up in a dry, unassuming village, ten of us, engineering students looking for an idea for a project. I remembered the wildness in Vivek’s eyes as he said, “There’s so much we can do here, Radha. There’s so much we can do.”

The monsoon had just begun, but summer was leaving the countryside on reluctant feet. We were sitting on a rock by the side of an orchard, enjoying the sunset and the sound of the river and



the smell of the village. I remember that evening so clearly. A little boy handed us two tender coconuts to sip from. We looked around, and there was a man on the coconut tree, probably the child's father, smiling and signaling, "Drink it, drink it." The coconuts had been warmed by the sun, and the pure sweetness of the juice as it slid down our throats was like nectar. Touch and taste and smell and feel came together.

"Where else?" Vivek asked. "Where else but in India?" and that was when we made a promise to ourselves and to our country... and to each other. To be pure of motive, and to make a difference to the land that we both loved.

That first visit to the village made such an impression on us that many years later, it was here that our new firm planned its first project. A project to ensure uninterrupted water supply to the orchards of K.halli, so that the hidden treasure of its amazing mangoes could be shared, sold, and finance the development of the village.

Vivek was so passionate about this project – how had he changed his mind? I went back home to a disturbed sleep and the next morning, my husband looked at me and asked me what was wrong, as he gave me my morning cup of tea.

"It looks like Vivek doesn't want to come back from Germany. I may have to run the business alone."

He said, "That's not such a bad thing, is it? I'm sure I can help you buy out his share of the company. And you can run it alone."

"You don't understand!" I burst out, "I don't want to run it alone. I want my

buddy with me."

Sekhar looked at me, his face expressionless, as I quietly picked up my bag and left for work. The day wore on, dull, boring, and carrying somehow the stink of discouragement.

"How do I get him to come back? What can bring him back?" I thought feverishly as I walked back into the office, and stared at Vivek's mail again, trying to see if there was some other way I could interpret it, if there was even a raindrop of hope that he might come back. I remembered how, as we walked back to class in the rain that very first day of our friendship, Vivek had said, "This smell of the first rain on the soil, it is the perfume of India. How can anyone say goodbye to it?"

"That's it! That's what I am going to do!" I decided, on a sudden impulse. "I'm going to send Vivek the perfume of India. That will bring him back."

I did a quick desperate search online and found that there was indeed a perfume called 'mitti ka attar' which held the fragrance of the first rain and it was manufactured far away in a small town called Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh.

And then I had to tell my husband. For a second, he just looked at me, and said, "I think you are crazy. It's the middle of the term examination – our daughter needs you here. It doesn't make sense, Radha. Flying off to Uttar Pradesh looking for a perfume! I'm sorry – I just don't understand how your mind works..."

I was so desperate to believe in this insane idea that I did not even bother to argue. I was convinced – in my heart, there was an unshakeable belief – that

Vivek only had to smell the ‘mitti ka attar’, and he would surely come back. Through all these years of knowing each other, of falling in love with different people, getting married, but still remaining true friends, the one thing that we had shared – apart from our commitment to simplicity and social justice and to improving the world we lived in – was our love for India, and for the fragrance of her first rain. I believed that Vivek only had to breathe in one whiff of mitti ka attar and he would come back. Back to our dreams, back to our goal of making the K.halli mango famous, and K.halli prosperous.

It was as if a madness had possessed me. But in some crazy way, in the face of Vivek’s betrayal, I needed the madness to stay sane. I tried not to notice my husband’s anger and my daughter’s tears as I took leave. On the flight, I stared out at the hot sky as I feverishly imagined how Vivek would react when he received the attar.

I spent a sleepless night in the stifling heat of Lucknow, and then took a bus to Kannauj. At first sight, the town was disappointing – it was hot, dusty, and dry. It was difficult to believe that this small town held the secrets of a myriad fragrances – jasmine and khus, petrichor and musk – some to calm men, others to drive them mad. I asked around and made my way to Vijay market. It was crowded, noisy and dirty, and it smelled like heaven might. I just stood there, letting the fragrances wash over me and fill me. I wandered around the market asking for mitti ka attar, and was directed to a tiny shop in a corner.

In my rusty Hindi, I asked the old woman sitting at the shop for mitti ka attar. We gazed at each other for a minute – I saw a wrinkled face, faded eyes, a head covered with a dark blue cotton sari – what did she see when she looked at me? I’m not sure – but she shook her head, handed me a tiny bottle and said, “This is what you want – mitti ka attar.”

I was just about to remove the stopper when she suddenly said, “Stop... don’t.” “Why?” I asked with a laugh, surprised.

“Don’t smell it. There is magic inside!”

“That’s ok, I need some magic in my life,” I said, a little annoyed.

“Sometimes magic can be dangerous. It’s not for you,” she said once more, patiently.

“But I’ve travelled hundreds of kilometres just to buy this perfume,” I told her, a little exasperated.

“Bet, it is not for you,” She repeated once more in that same slow patient tone.

I shook my head, muttered, “Crazy old lady,” and walked away with the vial clutched tightly in my palm. I couldn’t wait to see if it was true – if this fragrance really held the poetry and the feel of the first rain. I stood just outside the market, my hand trembling as I carefully pulled out the stopper. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, and there, on that dusty road, in the hot sun and dry breeze, the fragrance and romance of the monsoon swept into my mind. I swayed a little as I stood there, eyes closed.

I missed Vivek. We were not lovers, but what we had was something infinitely more precious, and rare between a man and a woman. We were best friends. We were proof against the belief held by

most people that a platonic friendship was impossible between a man and a woman if they were both heterosexual and unattached. We held shared ideals, we refused to be seduced by easy money and shortcuts. Or maybe I just thought we did.

I loved Vivek dearly – and I forced myself now to examine if my motives in trying to make him return were pure. I loved him, and that made his betrayal the more bitter. It hurt too much – I couldn't bear it.

"Beti, are you ok?" I opened my eyes to see a kind faced lady looking at me with concern.

"I'm ok."

A little girl standing next to her asked me, "What's in the bottle?"

I smiled down at her, and let her smell the mitti ka attar.

"Ma, it's the rain!" she said excitedly.

"It's not the rain, darling, it is not real. It's only the smell of the rain."

I looked at the cloudless sky and the sun hurt my eyes. Maybe that's why I was crying. It wasn't real. I looked at the tiny stoppered bottle, and realized that the old woman was right. It was magic and it was dangerous.

I would not send the bottle to Vivek. It wouldn't make a difference if I did. He had found his path; I couldn't drag him

onto mine. That would not be right. He would not come back, and it was time to accept that.

I raised my hand to throw away the precious petrichor, the fragrance that I had found with so much difficulty, the fragrance that I was now coming to accept was just that – a dream, an illusion, and not the solution to my problems.

I took a deep breath of that smell so full of promise, it went straight up to my brain, and this time, what I saw was not the past, but the future. I saw the village of Kodiganahalli in the dense green of mango orchards. I saw people lining up to buy the famous K.halli mango, and I saw the peacefulness of prosperity on the faces of the villagers.

I breathed in the petrichor once more and this time, what I felt was not longing, it was determination.

The dam we'd lobbied to build, the educational programs we had for the villagers, the rain harvesting we taught them, I could make it work. It would be tough, but I could make it work.

I went back to the old lady and gave her back the petrichor. "You're right. It's not for me," I said.

I had to get back home. There was work to be done.



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# POETRY

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## A Love Poem

Vijayalakshmi Harish

A book blogger and writer, Vijayalakshmi's interests include mythology and psychology, which often find their way into her writing.

It's ridiculous –

the complexity of writing a love poem for you.  
i struggle with the mystique of this fine wine glass;  
delicate; slightly chipped by chance but held together  
by some magic glue of your invention.

Like a bubble

i exist, only because your breath mingles with my own,  
as we go about the minor business of living, patching together  
our days and nights into a multi-coloured quilt.

On this foundation my friability

stands unafraid, securely wrapped in your arms,  
that are capable only of affection;  
tender, even in the roughness of our passionate play

Verily, you are

my inkwell, my pen stand, a scaffold to my voice  
your hands send me soaring skywards like a kite,  
to play with dreams that i've launched  
as balloons being blown towards the sea.

Effervescent as always,

it was your smile that in broad daylight pulled me in  
and then pushed me plummeting through the gaps between the stars.  
it was not love at first sight but something more i felt.  
i did all i could to clasp on.

You have turned me

into a palimpsest, engraving yourself over my every grievance, every lesion,  
as you trace poetry with your finger on my nakedness,  
and erase it with kisses over and over again,  
until your love is burned into my skin as a fragrance i carry through the day.

On other nights

you are a vision of peace, giving me the courage  
even as you sleep, to battle the dragons in my nightmares.  
even through your silence, your encouragement resonates within and without me.  
and with you beside me the world seems to flow naturally.

Underneath all these  
swirling tumultuous waters something else hides  
a pebble of emotion that defies vocabulary,  
and which makes “I love you” sound inadequate and juvenile.  
for when our quintessence is alike and our marrows linked  
mortal language does not suffice.



## POETRY

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### Reflux

Shruti Rao

Shruti is a freelance writer and editor, studying  
for a Masters' degree in the USA.

These days, filled. Like the tartness  
of a quivering, perfect orange  
ready to be peeled, split apart  
and ingested, with the hope of  
the chronically ill, that it will stay  
down, never having a reason to  
boil right back up in a tantrum  
of crippling denial. That your body  
will not reject it as a foreign body.

That love is not a trigger food,  
that love will stay down.



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Photo: Rachna Singh

## INTERVIEW

### Shinie Antony

Author of short-fiction collections *Barefoot and Pregnant*, *Seance on a Sunday Afternoon*, *Planet Polygamous* and *The Orphanage For Words*, Shinie Antony has also compiled the anthologies *Why We Don't Talk* and *Kerala, Kerala, Quite Contrary*. She won the Commonwealth Short Story prize for the Asia region in 2003.

She has authored two novels: *Kardamom Kisses* and *When Mira Went Forth and Multiplied*. Shinie is also a co-founder of the Bangalore Literature Festival (BLF), an annual event on the cultural calendar of Bangalore since 2012.

Here, she chats with Reading Hour in trademark Shinie-style: funny, honest, insightful.

Does the life stage you are in tend to influence what you write about?

Writing is a kind of constant evolving, of what and how we write, an organic movement that's so mercurial, so moody that it's self-surprising. In the span of a single book, the writer goes places he's never been to, was too afraid to visit, he explores damage and drama and anything he was too terrified to look in the eye. So I'd say yes, stages in life do impact us as much as our thinking and writing propel us into newer stages of life.

How do you think writing helps a writer? (Besides earning a living... or not!)

The minute you sit down to tell a story, you need a voice, you need a tale worth telling, you have to have the urge to tell that story and that story alone, and tell it to your best ability. First drafts and multiple attempts at writing clear the path, and lead to a clearer surer voice. A voice without a false note.

Writers are wont to rue having to write – is this for real, or do you disparage it because it is so precious?

At every level, it is a deeply personal and painful act to write. Writers are always having to distil, to absorb, to narrate and relate, none of which is a comforting activity. On the contrary, it is a sleepless, relentless second nature of self-doubt that goes beyond the physical act of sitting somewhere to write.

Your writing focuses on human issues and the

human condition – do you think writers must inspire change, or can they at best hold up a mirror to society?

Inspiring change and holding mirrors to society are not mutually contradictory. Without brutal honesty, there is no beginning, no scaffolding in place, for change to enter minds.

Your writing is often witty, sometimes biting, with certain phrases being almost a slap on the face of convention. Has this ever got you any extreme reactions?

With my very first manuscript, I was told this was writing that would evoke extreme reactions, that a reader will either love it or hate it. I won't apologise for making people sit up, but I am the first to admit not everyone likes my style.

Your short stories are conversations, even if it is the main character talking to himself / herself. There is little emphasis on 'place' or locality. Is this because of the format?

Very early on, I gave up on place and time as they somewhat limit the universality of the truths being told. Even say, religion; why bring this in if it is irrelevant to the story and the character, who he prays to and how he prays. So when we say Reema or Rachel or Ruhi, it must be for a reason. Nothing should take away from the story. The conversations or internal monologues bring out the high drama of being human, a unifying experience worth sharing.

Your stories are not 'sentimental'. There is



emotion, but it is camouflaged under wit and word play. Is that how your characters deal with what life deals them?

Emotions are a given. Now how do we deal with them? Sometimes characters cannot escape the clichéd turns, but at other times, they are home alone, letting their hair down and won't bother with masks or conventions. Small talk and sense of humour are two audible measures of how far one has travelled culturally, of how much one is able to translate all of their education and exposure into attitude.

You've never abandoned the short story! What attracts you to it?

The refining process. Of course, novels do that too. But somehow in a short story space is so at a premium, one cannot sit back. Short fiction demands that only the bare minimum remains. What you keep is what's left after you pare down.

Who are your favourite authors (or stories) in the short form?

Saki (whose *Open Window* was the very first I read), Alka Saraogi, Roald Dahl, Margo Lanagan, Damon Runyon, Dave Eggers, RK Narayan.

Authors / publishers in India complain that the short story anthology is not saleable... your view? Do you enjoy reading them?

It is an IWE (Indian writing in English) lament that short stories are a nightmare to sell and as for poetry, don't ask. I am a fan of short fiction. And since I believe that this format is ideal to most telling – not all, mind you – I feel many movies and novels could have worked better in shorter versions. Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya* works so well because it is a short film. A longer version may have gotten prurient, but the present length is just perfect for that story.

Author. Editor. Co-founder of Bangalore Literature Fest. Which hat do you enjoy wearing the most?

Friend. Nothing is more pleasurable and life-changing than meeting and being with the right people. It is sheer luck if family members are good friends, and then there are the friends who come and go abruptly, and those who feel like they were always there. The day I stop enjoying the chats and surprises and jokes and coincidences, I will neither read nor write.

Many people may not know you as a popular editor, including several Chetan Bhagat books in your kitty. Do you find editing creatively satisfying or is it a bread-



and-butter thing? Does it help your own writing? How do you control the writer in you when you're editing – doesn't she butt in all the time and try to take control?

Nothing is bread-and-butter. You bring yourself to everything you do. All the time I am editing, I know that others will edit this differently, better-ly, but I also know I am editing it the way I want to, which makes it creatively satisfying. While editing, of course, one keeps the writer's consent in mind. Also, the writer in you can hardly interfere, for the simple reason that it is not your story, it did not jump out of your head. It is a story you heard, you are the first listener/reader and it is your job to say this is good, bad or ugly, and that opinion, thankfully, is only yours. Reading other people's work, whether for editing or simply reading, gives us access to other minds, other ways of thinking, which eventually, in turn, will define how you think, but by and large, you are not aware of this happening since it is a slow and unsteady kind of thing.

You've said, "Poetry is much more touching than prose. The connect is immediate; the membrane thinner. And sometimes the crafting — the sheer elimination of the unnecessary — can knock you down." Do you write poetry yourself?

Oh yes, poetry. Look at these lyrics from a Sound of Music song: 'She yodelled back to the lonely goatherd...' The imagery is swifter than any elaborate telling of it, almost like a painting inside your head.

You can call it frustrated poetry, I guess, my stories. They are built around

## Rapidfire

Which Indian writer does wit best?  
G Sampath.

Your favourite genre.  
Satire.

A movie that was better than the book?  
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

Your favourite location to write?  
My desk, facing Agara lake.

Potion of choice while writing?  
Coffee.

The book you read again and again?  
'Levels of Life' by Julian Barnes.

If not a writer, Shinie Antony the...?  
...Fortune-teller.

the verse I first attempt. This helps to a) get into the mind of the character b) cut through the formality of characterisation outside-in.

Marketing your book (and yourself) has become increasingly important nowadays. Why are you not on social media?

Right now, to me, social media is an animal of the wild. The people who cyber-speak about their literary outings are those who have tamed it a bit. As of now, I have no idea whether to pat its head or save my hand from getting

bitten.

Have your children shown any signs of following you into the writing and literary world? If they have/ did, what would you advise them?

Writing is too solitary and how and when one wants to open up about it is up to them... my kids, nieces and nephews might be writing but it is all kept hidden from me. My advice to them is: read.

It has been a few years now since you co-founded the Bangalore Literature Festival. What have been the highs / lows? What are the plans for the future?

The high is pulling it off each time. Lows are the annual doubts we have till it is happening right before our eyes. This

year, the dates are Dec 4, 5 and 6. We hope BLF will soon be a planned trip for all of India. That people will remember the dates and wait eagerly for it to happen.

As a columnist, you often write on topical happenings. Writing on demand and to meet a deadline – do you enjoy this as much?

The deadline is fixed, but the topic is mostly something that you feel strongly about. And since I choose what I write about, it is like getting it all off one's chest. I think it is an age thing... one wants to compare and contextualise because suddenly one feels one has lived long enough and has earned the right to opine.

Happy is what was, and what will be, never what is. Many an early hour she awakens absurdly happy, grinning like a madwoman, lost in a reverie from the past or dreaming something improbable, inappropriate. Senile but alive, life is all she has till she dies. Collating and recollecting instances of happiness...

...Trouble is, happiness is a noun. It smirks silently, invoking comparisons, disparities, the matter of more and less. Who is to say how happy one should be and what makes up happy and when happy is best? That, in all this military strategizing of contentment there are the here and now moments unasked for, unannounced. Like a sparrow sitting on a windowsill that flies off before she can look.

~ Excerpted from 'Happy'  
'The Orphanage for Words' – Shinie Antony



Visit <http://readinghour.in> to gift  
Reading Hour to a loved one!

# FICTION

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## Daisy Chain

Zuzu Keller

Zuzu is an award-winning poet. She is currently completing a memoir.

You jockeyed your green '74 Chevy truck up the boulder-strewn dirt road. Your driving impressed but frightened me. In places, the furrowed track was so steep you had to take a running go at it, gunning the engine and charging over rock shards jagged enough to puncture the tires. You held onto the steering wheel, but my lap belt couldn't keep me from pitching around the cab.

After punishing the Chevy that you called 'Maurice' to about 9,800 feet, you slowed at Bull Creek Pass and slid into a turnout barely wider than the pick-up.

You smiled, leaned towards me, and asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah, just queasy."

"You don't look queasy. You look great."

"I feel like crap. I look like crap."

"You don't look like crap."

"You haven't really noticed, have you?"

"Aw, jeez. Come on." Your smile faded.

"I'm sorry." I touched your hand.

Happy again, you gestured towards the mountain and said, "Meet Ellen."

Feeling jealous and stupid and tempted to make a quip about another girl, I took in a breath and kept quiet. I opened the cab door. We'd been driving for hours and my legs wobbled as I stood on the

uneven, hardpan ground. I tightened the laces of my hiking boots and then rummaged around in my daypack for Saltines.

Watching me fumble, you said, "Hey, we're burning daylight."

I could tell from your voice that you weren't angry. You never really got angry, just agitated sometimes, like an animal unsure of its surroundings. I put a salty cracker into my mouth, rubbed my belly gently, and slung the light canvas daypack over my shoulder. Trying to settle my stomach, I breathed deeply and took in the scent of evergreens. My shoulders relaxed. I straightened my back.

We crossed the dirt road. Veiled in a cool, early summer mist, the outcropping of the summit – almost 1,800 feet above us – was still imperceptible. It was nine o'clock. Stunted Utah daisies and rabbit brush grew in dogged clumps among the dwarfed Engelmann spruce. Besides my deep and steady breathing, the snapping of the dried spruce twigs under our feet was the only sound I heard.

You looked jaunty in your Stetson.

Intent on reaching the top, we climbed steadily. You didn't hesitate or look back. Nearing the timberline, the lavender-coloured daisies and the spruce disappeared giving way to just a few

stubby subalpine firs that grew in parched pockets of soil. We came to an overlook and gazed out at the vast countryside. I was sweating and still nauseous and lifted the damp hair off the back of my neck that cooled quickly in the dry breeze. I gulped in thin air. The boulders surrounding us smelled of concrete, as a sidewalk might on a hot, sunny day.

"The last free-roaming buffalo live here, on Ellen," you said, taking binoculars from your daypack.

For a long time, you searched for the illusive herd. Content to wait, I sat on the dusty ground and held my knees to my chest.

"Damn, there they are. I've only seen them once before."

You watched a while and then extended your hand towards me. "You've gotta see this."

I took your hand and you eased me to my feet. I peered through the binoculars but couldn't see anything except countryside that went on forever. "I don't know what I'm looking for," I said. "What am I looking for?"

"Here, let me help you."

You took back the glasses. "There, just below the rise at three o'clock."

I stared into the lenses but all I could make out was a dark shape that rippled far in the distance like a dim flicker of a fish well below the surface of the water.

"You see them now?" you asked, placing your hand gently on the small of my back.

"Maybe. I do see something. I guess I was expecting more."

"Man. They're so wild and free."

"I'm happy you spotted them," I said,

handing back the binoculars.

We turned around and faced the summit.

"It's tough going for the next quarter mile. Do you need my help?" Again, you held out your hand.

I touched your fingertips and said, "Yeah, I could use it."

Soon above the timberline, the trail disappeared into a great chaotic tumble of boulders, some huge and immovable, others small enough to turn dangerously underfoot. You guided me and we climbed slowly but intently, without further conversation, stopping only for water. Finally, after a long pull, sweating and panting, we reached the summit at just over 11,600 feet. Thousands of feet below, the Fremont River carved a sinuous valley from which red cliffs rose and escarpments undulated to the horizon. Distant plateaus, parched and pink, looked like new skin exposed too long to the midday sun. A sterile wind – free of insect, fragrance, or humidity – eddied and whistled around us. I crossed my arms around my body.

"Jesus," you said. "What a view."

You took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. And in that exhalation, I could hear the same note in your voice as sometimes afterwards, when we lay tangled together, when I imagine that you are grateful and pleased with yourself, and with me, and have no thoughts beyond the moment.

At the peak, a rocky bowl provided shelter from the wind. We sat and ate beef jerky, hard boiled eggs, and apples. I took a bite of jerky and let it soften in my mouth. I sucked at the salty meat. It tasted good. I wasn't queasy any more.

Within this depression, a ledger – inside a metal box – was fixed by a sturdy rusted chain to an iron stake. After lunch, I tried to make myself comfortable on my stony mattress, arranged my hair fan-like around my face, and pulled my hat down over my eyes. You began your ledger entry. Only a handful of hikers made it to the summit; fewer still wrote about it. No more than dimly aware of your concentration, I dozed in the skittish sun. When you finished, you snapped the ledger shut.

“Ready?”

We stood, stretched, and began our hike back down.

After we had descended below the timberline, you asked, “Need a rest?”

“Yeah,” I said, grateful to stop as my legs were beginning to feel weak and unreliable.

Before sitting down beside me, you gathered a handful of stunted daisies.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well?” you echoed, stringing the flowers into a chain. “A good climb. The buffalo... wow.”

“Is that what you wrote about up top? The buffalo?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Anything else?” I asked feeling silly, yet impatient.

“You don’t see a free-roaming herd every day.”

“No, but I thought you might have written about, you know, us.”

“Us? That’s a big word,” you laughed and looked at me.

“Or not so big... depending.”

Your smile faded and your gaze went back to the daisies.

After a moment, I said, “I know it was a surprise.”

“Here.” You reached over and put the daisy chain around my wrist.

“Thanks. It’s sweet.”

“I’ve been thinking. You might need better transportation.”

“Transportation?” I repeated.

“Yeah. Something more dependable than your old Honda. I have the truck. It’s all I need. You can have my Mustang. It’s almost a classic.”

“You want to give me a car?”

You had a goofy grin on your face. “Yeah. I figured you could use something.”

I sighed and stroked the delicate petals. Your brow furrowed.

“I thought you’d be happy with the car.”

I looked you straight in the face, “I do need something to rely on.”

“I’m good for it.”

“You are, aren’t you?”

“All the way.”

You turned and looked back at the mountain. The clouds now gone, Ellen stood out in perfect detail.

“Wow, what a girl. She’s something, isn’t she?” you said.

“Yes, she’s something.”

I put my hand on my stomach. The late afternoon wind made me shiver. “I’m cold.”

“We should walk. It’s still a ways.”

The sun slanted through the trees as we neared the Chevy. We climbed back into the truck, and you started driving. I fingered the daisy chain on my wrist.

“I appreciate your offer,” I said. “Of the car.”

“She’s yours if you want her.”  
“Yes, I’ve decided. I want her. It. And the car.”  
“This is more than just a loaner, you know. I’ll sign over the pink slip.”  
“Thanks,” I said.  
“We’ll make it legal.”  
“Sounds good.”

“And you know, if we take care of her, she will last us a long time.”  
“There’s that big word again. Us.”  
“Yeah.” You laughed. “Feeling better?”  
“I feel fine.”  
“Good.”  
“We’re all fine,” I said, fingering the daisy chain.



## POETRY

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### Mars Is A Metaphor

A P Govindankutty

Govindankutty writes occasionally, in Malayalam and English.

When the Earth was taking shape  
From the swirling chaos,  
A ball of fire sailed out  
Into space,  
And in time, cooled into a solid mass –  
Men on Earth called it Mars.

Ever-beholden to the ball of fire  
Cast-away as placenta  
When the Earth was born  
Of the labours of Chaos,  
Children of the Earth yearn  
To know more and more of Mars,  
Some dream of kin there,  
Some dream of visiting;  
The eternal urge to journey back  
To the source of one’s being?

Still, I wonder why man called it Mars,  
Name of the Roman god of wars.





## The Idea Of Tragedy

Manjushree Hegde

*The spirit of inquiry meets the spirit of poetry  
and tragedy is born  
- Edith Hamilton.*

A few nights ago, I read a charming anecdote:

One twilight, in the year 450 B.C, an Athenian fleet cast anchor on an island in the Ægean. Come dawn, the army would attack the island, and win another victory for Athens, but on that night, the commander-in-chief, Pericles, sent an invitation to his second-in-command to sup with him on the flag-ship. So there you may see them, sitting on the ship's high deck, a canopy over their heads to keep off the dew. One of the attendants is a beautiful boy, and as he fills the cups, Pericles wistfully quotes a line about the "purple light" upon a fair young cheek. The younger general is critical: to him, that color-adjective is ill-chosen. He prefers another poet's use of rosy to describe the bloom of youth. Pericles, on his side, objects: that very poet had elsewhere used purple in the same way when speaking of the radiance of young loveliness. So the conversation went on, each man capping the other's quotation with one as apt. The entire talk at the supper table turned on delicate and

Manjushree is a freelance writer, voracious reader, and dedicated student of Sanskrit.

fanciful points of literary criticism, but when the battle began the next morning, these same men, fighting fiercely and directing wisely, carried the attack on the island.

Now, I cannot vouch for the literal truth of this anecdote; nonetheless, it draws for us a beautiful picture of what the Athenians of the great age of Athens were like: two cultivated gentlemen, able before a battle, to absorb themselves in poetry. It is a combination rarely found in the annals of civilization.

Civilization, a much abused word, stands for a high matter quite apart from telephones and electric lights. It is a matter of imponderables, of delight in the things of the mind, of love of beauty, of honor, grace, courtesy, delicate feeling. And such imponderables were of supreme importance in ancient Greece. How important? The poet Sophocles, so the story is told, in his extreme old age, was brought into court by his son who charged him with being incompetent to manage his own affairs. The aged tragedian's sole defense was to recite to the jurors passages from a play he had recently written. Those great words did not fall on deaf ears. Judge a man who could write such poetry not competent in any way? Who that called himself Greek

could do that? Nay: dismiss the case; fine the complainant; let the defendant depart honoured and triumphant.

Again, when Athens had fallen and her Spartan conquerors held high festival on the eve of destroying the city altogether, razing to the ground the buildings, not a pillar to be left standing on the Acropolis, one of the men charged with the poetical part of the entertainment – even Spartans must have poetry to their banquet – gave a recitation from Euripides, and the banqueters, stern soldiers in the great moment of their hard-won triumph, listening to the beautiful, poignant words, forgot victory and vengeance, and declared as one man that the city such a poet had sprung from should never be destroyed.

Hamilton wrote, “Where imponderables are the things of first importance, there is the height of civilization, and if, at the same time, the power to act exists unimpaired, human life has reached a level seldom attained and very seldom surpassed.”

Out of such a civilization blossomed the idea of tragedy. Verily, of the four great tragic artists of the world – Shakespeare, Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides – three of them are Greek. Perhaps these men were thinking more and more deeply about human life, and beginning to perceive more and more clearly that it was bound up with evil and that injustice was of the nature of things. And perhaps one day, this knowledge of something irremediably wrong in the world came to a poet. A poet with power to see beauty in the truth of human life, a poet of surpassing magnitude, and of a

soul great enough to bear the intolerable truth, Æschylus. And so, the first tragedy was written.

But what, exactly, is tragedy?

“Pity and awe,” Aristotle called it, “and a sense of emotion purged and purified thereby.”

“Reconciliation,” said Hegel, which we may understand in the sense of life’s temporary dissonance resolved into eternal harmony.

“Acceptance,” said Schopenhauer, “the temper of mind that says: Thy will be done.”

“The reaffirmation of the will to live in the face of death,” said Nietzsche, “and the joy of its inexhaustibility when so reaffirmed.”

It is a strange matter. Tragedy shows us pain and gives us pleasure thereby. The greater the suffering depicted, the more terrible the events, the more intense our pleasure. The most monstrous and appalling deeds life can show are those the tragedian chooses, and by the spectacle he thus offers us, we are moved to a very passion of enjoyment. But it cannot be likened to sadism – it has no kinship with cruelty or the lust for blood.

Indeed, tragic pleasure is in a class by itself, something above and beyond the dissonance of pain. But what is the essential element of it, Hegel alone seeks to define. In a notable passage, he says that the only tragic subject is a spiritual struggle in which each side has a claim upon our sympathy. But, as his critics have pointed out, he would thus exclude the tragedy of the suffering of the innocent, and a definition which does not include the death of Cordelia or of Deianira

cannot be taken as final. Prometheus of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* is an innocent sufferer, but beyond this purely formal connection, that passionate rebel, defying God and all the powers of the universe, has no relationship whatever to the lovely, loving Cordelia. An inclusive definition of tragedy must include such opposites as Antigone, the high-souled maiden who goes with open eyes to her death rather than leave her brother's body unburied, and Macbeth, the ambition-mad, the murderer of his king and guest.

Perhaps one thing that binds them all together is the dignity and the significance of human life. The temper of mind that sees tragedy in life has not for its opposite the temper that sees joy. The opposite pole to the tragic view of life is the sordid view. When humanity is seen as devoid of dignity and significance, trivial, mean, and sunk in dreary hopelessness, then the spirit of tragedy departs.

To answer the question, then, of what makes a tragedy, is to answer the question – where lies the essential significance of life, what does the dignity of humanity depend upon in the last analysis? And the answer, perhaps, is suffering. It is by our power to suffer, above all, that we are different from other creatures. In Joseph Conrad's words, "what makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it..."

Of course, there are degrees in our

high estate of pain. It is not given to all to suffer alike. We differ in nothing more than in our power to feel. There are souls of little and of great degree, and upon that degree, the dignity and significance of each life depend. Tragedy's one essential is a soul that can feel greatly. Death is not tragic in itself, not the death of the beautiful and the young, the lovely and beloved. Death felt and suffered as Macbeth feels and suffers is tragic. Death felt as Lear feels Cordelia's death is tragic. Ophelia's death is not a tragedy. She being what she is, it could be so only if Hamlet's and Laertes' grief were tragic grief. The conflicting claims of the law of God and the law of man are not what make the tragedy of the Antigone. It is Antigone herself, so great, so tortured. Hamlet's hesitation to kill his uncle is not tragic. The tragedy is his power to feel. Change all the circumstances of the drama and Hamlet in the grip of any calamity would be tragic, just as Polonius would never be, however awful the catastrophe. The suffering of a soul that can suffer greatly – that and only that, is tragedy.

"Never let me hear that brave blood has been shed in vain," said Sir Walter Scott; "it sends an imperious challenge down through all the generations." The great soul in pain and in death transforms pain and death. Through it, we catch a glimpse of a deeper and more ultimate reality than that in which our lives are lived.



# FICTION

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## The Pranayama Machine

Chandrashekhar Sastry

Sastry is a retired engineer-scientist. He has to his credit a book on current affairs, a novel and many short stories (often prize winning) in anthologies and magazines.

Breathe in... breathe out, the Yoga Guru chanted in a pleasant sing-song voice as I breathed. "Deeper and longer," he sang. Looking straight at me, he advised, "Relax your face, no wrinkles, no stress." I tried hard to compose my face as I breathed deeper and longer.

My family physician had recommended breathing exercises for an ailment which prevented me from a proper night's sleep. I had related to him with desperation in my voice, "Doctor I am unable to sleep in the night. I have to sit up gasping and struggling for breath. I manage to get some relief only by dozing upright in a chair."

The doctor was sympathetic, and made a quick clinical examination. Holding a stethoscope to my chest, he listened attentively, and poking me in the abdomen, said, "This is a common thing with obese Senior Citizens. You must cut down your weight. Try Yoga and Pranayama. Many of my patients with respiratory problems have benefited." He prescribed some pills to help me sleep.

A Guru was referred to me by my social network. Some of my friends were admirers of the older traditions. Many sneered at modernity which has caused a multiplicity of illnesses in urban living.

My rallying to things modern quoting today's higher average age of Indians was ridiculed.

"Don't look at the modern as confronting the traditional; let it supplement the traditional," they said sagaciously.

"Don't close your mind. You are a man of Science. Understand that there can be things yet beyond our comprehension," the wife added, which is how I finally decided to try the ancient art of Yoga for my ailment.

The Guru wanted to initiate me on the recently promulgated International Yoga Day on the 21st of June for he felt that was a most propitious beginning. He was very effusive and explained that Pranayama was most helpful in all health problems and even had beneficial effects that we do not normally associate with the physique. The mind too, I was told, could be controlled by these techniques, with results that can only be called serendipitous extending beyond what one normally envisaged.

"Yoga will stop the restless thought waves of your mind and provide a personal and spiritual transformation. This is our ancient spiritual heritage. To practice Pranayama is to reach out and

control the very core of one's existence," said the Yoga Guru.

I was sorely in need of such a lifeline as the distress at night when I tried to sleep lying down was overwhelming; often it seemed I was suffocating to death. The pills prescribed proved inadequate for my insomnia.

"Breathe in... breathe out..." the Yoga Guru sang out three times a week in pleasant melody, and I obeyed. There were variants too – with the tongue rolled, or the teeth clenched or breathing through the back of the throat and so on. After a few weeks, I thought that I felt a little better but still the bad nights continued, albeit less frequently.

"Yoga takes a while to be effective," he said, "You have to go beyond the peripheral, beyond the trivial, beyond the superficial, and reach the inner man."

I likened it to peeling onions, layer after layer, to finally reach that inner essence which Yoga masters always extol. He advised patience which he said was one admirable quality that grew with the practice of Yoga.

I practiced patiently. But episodes of suffocation and the terror of dying in my sleep continued. I then went to an expensive specialist with many long degrees from overseas and I told him of my peculiar malady. He put me through several tests, some involving being strapped to an array of instruments for twenty four hours. After all that, he proclaimed that I needed a CPAP machine to help me breathe in the night. This was how I got myself the Pranayama Machine.

It was a small rectangular box, a little

smaller than a jewellery box, which contained an amazing amount of technology. The name derived from the Continuous Positive Airway Pressure the machine delivered. It had a little blower and could sense the intake of air to raise the pressure in the snake like corrugated flexible plastic pipe that led from the machine to a large shining plastic face mask, pushing air into the lungs, overcoming any constrictions in the air passages, helping the patient to inhale. It also sensed the exhalation and lowered the pressure in the pipe to allow the wearer of the mask to exhale. In short, the magical little machine helped me breathe in and breathe out rhythmically as in the Pranayama that I practiced. This machine answered all my prayers and I felt that with its aid, I could control the core of my existence, just as the Yoga Guru had said I could with Pranayama.

The house we lived in was an ancient one and I had bought it despite neighbours warning me that it was haunted. A former tenant named Ganesha had died here in mysterious circumstances, we were told. Even burglars were scared and kept away although the house had been uninhabited for six months. All the furniture and electrical fittings were intact. Even the water pump outside, a favourite item of night burglars, was untouched. I was a sceptic and believed that the Ghost, if it ever existed, would be scared of me and would keep away. Anyway, the rumours had depressed the price which is what helped me make up my mind. One untoward incident did occur within a few months of our moving in. Following

modern practice, we had installed a hob in the kitchen. Two gas cylinders were placed in an enclosure just outside the French windows, and the gates to the enclosure were padlocked. The cooking gas was piped from these cylinders to the hob.

One winter morning, we found that the lock had been prised open and both cylinders stolen some time during the night. We were quite surprised at the theft.

"I wish the Ghost had remained. That would have frightened the thieves away," said the wife laconically. Here was proof that we were indeed rid of the Ghost, for burglars and thieves were prowling about undeterred.

We had all but forgotten the Ghost until a year later, when I started having sleepless nights with those frightful nightmares of being drowned. I was unnerved and my scepticism felt tested. Had the exorcised Ghost returned to the house? Was it the cause for my nightly tossing; was it sitting on my chest and throttling me, robbing my lungs of life giving air? Nevertheless, the rationalist in me refused to succumb, and led me to the two doctors who had prescribed the differing remedies. The family pressed me to adopt both treatments; they are not mutually exclusive, they emphasised.

"There must be synergy between traditional and the modern," I was told.

I ended up practicing Pranayama early in the mornings and using the Pranayama Machine to ease my sleep at nights.

This judicious mixing of tradition and modernity would cure me for good, I thought.

And then there was one full moon night. I had gone to bed with the plastic mask and its wrinkled pipe strapped on to my face. The Pranayama machine was lulling me to sleep. It was helping me breathe in and breathe out, longer and deeper, exactly as the Yoga Guru had said, and I was sleeping fairly well.

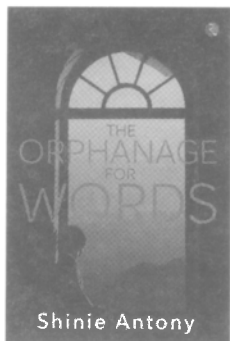
It must have been past the witching hour when I heard the clink of metal outside the French windows. I sprang out of bed and rushed to the window, the mask still on and the pipe hanging from my face. Forcefully pulling aside the curtains, I looked outside as the moonlight lit up my plastic face mask with an unearthly luminosity. There were two men trying to open the enclosure to the gas cylinders. Hearing the violent drawing of the curtains, they looked up and saw me with my full head of silvery white hair and long, unkempt white beard. The corrugated pipe waved madly, a snake-like nose growing off my visage. "Aiyo! Run! It's Ganesha the Ghost!" they yelled fearfully, and dropping their crowbar and other tools, they sprinted across the lawn and vaulted over the gate to disappear down the street.

Thus did the Yoga Guru's prophecy come true and I finally appreciated the synergy arising from the mixing of tradition and modernity. Yoga and the Pranayama machine had proved their benefits beyond the anticipated.



# REVIEWS

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An Orphanage For Words  
Shinie Antony

Rupa (2015)

Reading Hour Review

“Short stories are like an urgent whisper,” says Shinie Antony. Indeed, hers are. Shinie’s short story voice is economical yet expressive, and sharp. *The Orphanage For Words* is the latest short-fiction collection from the talented writer who has authored three prior collections and also edited short fiction anthologies.

The blurb at the back questions, “Where do they go, words no one wants? No one uses anymore?” They are shelved, we realise, consigned to orphanages, along with the feelings that spawned them, feelings that have, in turn, outlived their usefulness, that are not wanted any more.

These short stories do not brim over with characters. Shinie’s protagonists often run the entire story only in their heads, talking to themselves or to you. And through their struggles with what life has dealt them, we are offered precious insights such as what Sevi gives us in “The Frock”: “Sight is such a prison; when open, eyes are always settling on bars and flat surfaces, seeing only what is, unable to reach beyond. To dream, to see into the future, into what could be, to what she wished there to be, and most of all, what she couldn’t even begin to want – first

and foremost, eyes must close.”

In fact, Shinie dwells more in the heads of her characters than in their settings or their histories or their backgrounds. Beyond their names and their relation with other characters, we know almost nothing about where a character is from, what her room, house or garden look like, or what God she prays to.

They converse, these characters, they all speak in voices that try to snatch a laugh at life’s cruelties and realities, they are witty and urbane and nonchalant; they say, even when they are losing a breast to cancer: “The disease was eating into her lymph nodes and her outer chest wall, the naughty thing.” But for all the clever talk, there is a core of deep ‘human-ness’ in the stories. Stories like *Fathers*, and *Breasts*, and many others – the intensity of feeling at the core of these stories, however lightly served up, will make your breath catch in your throat.

Most of the protagonists are women. The men in the stories, if they aren’t fathers, seem rather inconsequential, even shallow.

The stories are short but they are not light reading! The slim book is a surprising lot to go through. Given the undeniable felicity Shinie has with words, I did wish a couple of lighter stories had been included.

We read to learn from experiences that aren’t our own. We read and are sometimes able to make sense of our own experiences, or feel less lonely about them. Shinie’s story telling is sharp, uncompromising, witty, and digs deep into the human psyche. This book isn’t only for those who enjoy reading fiction, it is a must for those who write it too.

# Franny and Zooey

J.D. Salinger

Franny and Zooey  
JD Salinger

Back Bay Books

Review: Manjushree Hegde

In 1951, J.D. Salinger published *A Catcher in the Rye* and shot to fame. Two years later, in 1953, he retreated to New Hampshire and became a notorious recluse. Although he remained so for all his life, he continued to work on his stories, and published them infrequently in *The New Yorker*. During this time, Salinger became obsessed with one idea – creating the Glass family.

The Glass family comprised of Les and Besse Glass, and their 7 children: Seymour, Webb (fondly called Buddy), Beatrice (Boo Boo), Walter, Waker, Zachary Martin (Zooey), and Frances (Franny).

The Glass family was not an ordinary family. No. It was a family whose bedroom doors were covered with quotations from the Bhagavad Gita and Kafka. It was a family whose table talk ranged from Buddhism to crisis theology. A family of precocious children who, at one time or another, featured in a radio show for the geniuses, “It’s a wise child”. A family with overstuffed bookshelves and overfilled minds. Seymour and Buddy, for example, were reading classics of literature before they were 8. They were in college by the time they were 15. Zooey had a “somewhat preposterous ability to quote, instantaneously and, usually, verbatim, almost anything he had ever read.” Each child knew the canons of

the East and the West. Each was brilliant, simply too brilliant. No, the Glass family was not an ordinary family.

Salinger wrote 8 stories about the Glass Family, exploring different characters in each of them: *A perfect day for bananafish*, *Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut*, *Down at the Dinghy*, *Franny*, *Raise high the Roof Beam Carpenters*, *Zooey*, *Seymour- an introduction*, and *Hapworth 16, 1924*. In crafting these characters, Salinger borrowed from his previous stories: Walter was drawn from *Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut* (1948), Boo Boo and Buddy from *Down at the Dinghy* (1949), Frances from his *Franny* (1955), and the most important, Seymour, from *A perfect day for Bananafish* (1948). Finally, with the publication of *Raise high the roof beam, carpenters* (1955), the Glass family was set. These set of characters would become a peg for Salinger to hang his thoughts, his meditations and readings, his spiritual struggle and search for nobility and truth in modern society. Most of the stories are fractured narratives containing reflections of the different characters, so to know / understand the family fully, one must read all 8, gather the slippery strands of ideas, and weave them together.

*Franny and Zooey* is just 157 pages long. Published in the *New Yorker* as separate stories in 1955 and 1957, the two first appeared together as a novella in 1961, for both were continuous in time, and had in common the subject of Franny’s spiritual crisis. In *Franny*, Franny, the youngest of the Glass siblings, is shown as a College student, passing through a plausible moment of disillusionment. She has discovered – perhaps rather recently – a certain ugliness in the hungry human



ego and a certain fatuity in her college environment. She is attempting to find her way out with the help of a religious book, "The Way of a Pilgrim". In *Zooey*, Franny has returned home to New York. She is shown in the family's apartment, talking to her brother, Zooey, about her inner struggle. In a lengthy conversation, she tells him of her disgust with the world, of the egotism inherent in it. Zooey is unsympathetic, but nonetheless, he tries to help her. He tells her of the Fat Lady: years ago, when the Glass children were appearing for the radio show, Zooey once didn't want to shine his shoes before going on air. His eldest brother, Seymour, told him to simply do it, to do it for the Fat Lady. Seymour never told him who the Fat Lady was, and Zooey never asked. But in his imagination, the Fat Lady was a singularly unlovable person who sat on her porch all day and listened to the radio. But for the radio, but for the Glass children's performance, she would not be alive. Seymour, apparently, had also told Franny to be funny on the show "for the Fat Lady". Zooey then tells Franny that all the world is Seymour's Fat Lady. All the phony

intellectuals, all the pompous professors of whom Franny had been complaining about, all the "pedants and conceited little tearer-downers" and all the "ego, ego, ego", all of them are the Fat Lady. In Zooey's words, "there isn't anyone out there who isn't Seymour's Fat Lady", and that the Fat Lady is "Christ himself, buddy". Yes, that Fat Lady is Christ himself. And Franny must love the Fat Lady, she must love all of them, she must learn to see Christ in all of them. And that will liberate her.

At the end of this conversation, Franny feels a profound joy, and the story ends with her falling into a deep, dreamless sleep in her parent's room.

John Updike wrote, "Few writers since Joyce would risk such a wealth of words upon events that are purely internal and deeds that are purely talk." Indeed, in what Salinger himself described as a "pretty skimpy-looking book", he manages to steamroll a sizeable chunk of the human condition. *The Catcher in the Rye* may be Salinger's most famous book, but for me, *Franny and Zooey* is his masterpiece.

"She said she knew she was able to fly because when she came down she always had dust on her fingers from touching the light bulbs."

~ J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*



# ESSAY

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## Battle For Travancore

Sreelata Menon

Sreelata is a freelance writer who writes on anything and everything. She has been published by Penguin-Puffin and several print and online journals.

Illustrations: Sashi Menon

Don't you know I have achieved a great victory recently in Malabar and over four lakh Hindus were converted to Islam? I am determined to march against that cursed Raman Nair, the Raja of Travancore, very soon. Since I am overjoyed at the prospect of converting him and his subjects to Islam, I have happily abandoned the idea of going back to Srirangapatnam now.

So wrote Tipu Sultan in a letter to Governor Zuman Khan of Bekal on the 19th of January 1790.

225 odd years later, the jury is still out on whether it was indeed a 'great victory' or a great assault on religious sensibilities. It all depends, as usual, on whose point of view, it is that of the conqueror, or of the vanquished.

What can be said is that as one grew up – intermittently in Malabar, or Palghat to be precise – in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tipu was the ultimate threat. We children were often cowed into obedience by, 'If you don't eat / sleep / behave, Tipu will come and take you away.'

Now all grown up and gripped by curiosity regarding the bogey of my childhood, I delved into history and was frankly delighted to find that much as he would have liked to believe that Kerala was his for the taking (true to an extent, he did overrun most of Malabar), in

reality, Kerala had not succumbed all that easily to his dictates. History threw up a little known battle of how the great Tipu Sultan was forced to retreat by many of my ancestors who used both guile and brawn to defeat him.

At the time that Tipu wrote that letter in 1790, he was 40 years old and he had been expanding his domain for eight years already.

When his father Hyder Ali died in 1782, Tipu inherited a vast empire that stretched from the Krishna River in the north and the Eastern Ghats, to the Arabian Sea in the west. Assuming rule of the Sultanate of Mysore, he immediately set about continuing what Hyder Ali had begun. But he had a grander vision.

Swayed, perhaps, by the image of the powerful but now waning Mughal Empire in the north, he set about establishing a similar, even greater Islamic Empire rooted in the south. He began, in right earnest, a campaign of subjugation and conversion, even inviting foreign Islamic rulers to aid him in his efforts.

And yet, despite this, Tipu was quick to go to the aid of the Sankaracharya of Sringeri who sought help from marauding Maratha mercenaries. He also continued to give grants of land, cash, gold and silver to Sringeri and other temples

for many years after. Though he razed to ground innumerable churches and forcibly converted Christians to Islam, he built, at the request of the French, the first church in Mysore. He destroyed thousands of temples and ruthlessly let loose a cruel regime of conversion against the Nairs and the Brahmins, yet many of his key posts, including that of the Prime Minister, were manned by Hindus.

A man of contradictions or a man of guile, who can tell? Perhaps it was sheer expediency.

But on the fateful day that he decided to lay siege to Travancore, the 'Tiger of Mysore' was evidently unburdened by any noble thoughts of religious amiability. He was only following his policy of aggressive Islamic aggrandizement.

Tipu had had his eye on Travancore for a while. His father's attempts to capture it had come to naught. However, the successful taking of Malabar had handed them not only Cochin and Palakad but all the little principalities between and around them. Although he chose to set his palace and himself on fire rather than be converted, the Zamorin of Calicut too had succumbed. But the Zamorin's family now sought refuge in Travancore as did many of the wealthy Nairs and Nambudris from Cochin and other parts of Malabar. It was almost a mass Hindu exodus. The fact that the Raja of Travancore granted them sanctuary provoked Tipu, and he demanded they be sent back.

But what annoyed him more was the Raja's acquisition of the two forts of Cranganore and Ayakota (located in



Tipu Sultan: Tiger of Mysore

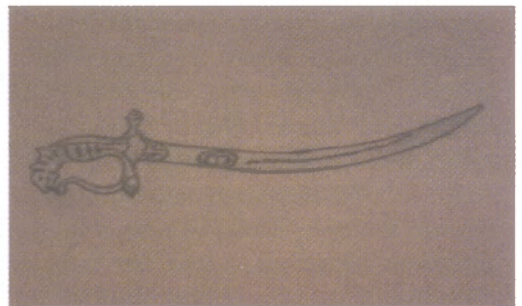
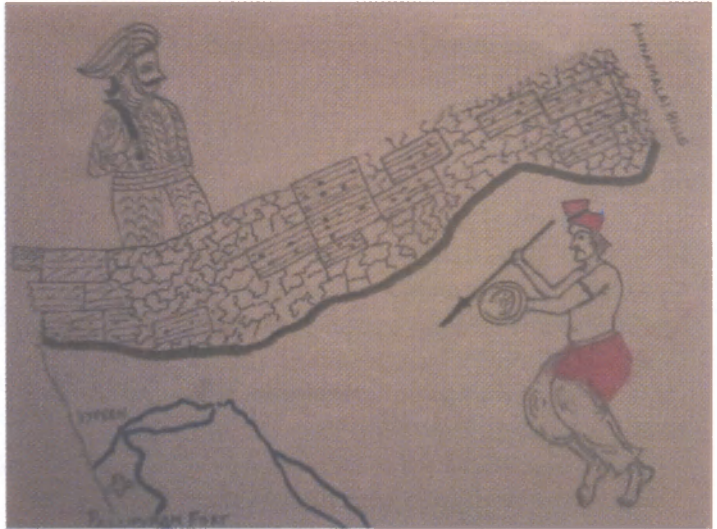
the state of Cochin, but owned by the Dutch East India Company) which effectively expanded Travancore's line of defense into Tipu's territory. He needed to rectify that. He also needed money. His campaigns against the British and the Marathas were a huge drain on his resources as were the many little uprisings he had to constantly contend with in Malabar and elsewhere. And Travancore was a rich state. So having secured all territories up to Cochin from whom he received 'tributes', he now trained his eyes on Travancore to the south.

### **First Battle – Nedumkotta**

Tipu chose to come in from the north – from Coimbatore – for the attack. The Travancore line of defense known as the Nedumkotta line extended from

the Vypeen islands in the sea to the Annamalai hills up north. It went along the river Periyar that cut through the town of Aluva and then continued beside the Chalakudy River into the hills. 35-48 miles long and 12 miles high with a 20ft wide, 16ft deep ditch skirting it on the inside, it was a massive wall of mud and clay intermittently buttressed by granite stones and laterite. With bunkers for soldiers, and hollow spaces to store arms and gunpowder, it had mounted field guns and look outs that ran along its entire length. Broad roads for easy movement of arms, combined with a moat filled with poisonous snakes, cacti and other such innovative incendiary weapons, made it a seemingly impregnable first line of defense. Raised and built in 1763 on the orders of Dharma Raja Karthika Tirunal Rama Varma, then ruler of Travancore, by a Dutch Captain De-Lannoy serving in the Travancore army, the Nedumkotta fortifications had kept many a marauder, including Hyder Ali, at a distance.

Now Tipu planned a surreptitious attack from the side, under cover of night. Leaving the majority of his massive forces in front of the main gate, he led a 14,500 strong infantry battalion into the fortifications a few miles away. He was surprised at the ease with which he gained entry. As he kept advancing and levelling the fortifications, the Travancore army, under the orders of their wily



Top: The Nedumkotta Wall  
Above: Tipu's Sword

Commander-in-chief Raja Kesava Das (Raman Kesava Pillay), the Dewan of Travancore, kept retreating. Maintaining a manageable gap, they kept falling back silently and before Tipu knew it, he had been lured well into the moat. Then suddenly, using the same element of surprise which Tipu had hoped to avail of when he had crept in from the side, the Dewan's men turned in full force to take them on.

Under the continuous barrage of unexpectedly heavy enemy fire, Tipu's

men, who had begun filling the ditch to create a passage to get across, could only manage a narrow path. Tipu nevertheless decided to advance. This move back-fired drastically. When, with bayonets in hand, they charged forward, another posse of Travancorean soldiers under Vaikom Padmanabha Pillay fell upon them, hemming them in. Outflanked totally, the battle that followed was a disaster for Tipu. His commander-in-chief was killed and he himself was maimed.

His men turned tail in panic and with nowhere to go, trampled each other in their desperation to get out of the ditch. In a bloody *mêlée*, body upon body, Tipu's famed army lay around him in tatters while he himself was carried aloft to stumbling safety, barely alive.

Thus ended Tipu's first siege of Travancore. His personal standard, palanquin, ring, sword and dagger, were found scattered, and presented to Dharma Raja.

### **The Second Battle – Aluva**

Tipu retired to recoup, but was now more determined than ever to take Travancore. Camping in front of the Nedumkotta on the banks of the Periyar in Aluva (Travancore-Cochin border), he called for reinforcements. He first methodically dismantled the remnants of the Nedumkotta. Next, he recaptured the two forts. With Travancore's northern life of defense thus decimated, he was ready. Within three months, he mounted another attack.

Dewan Raja Kesava Das knew that his army was no match in size or weaponry to Tipu's. The Nedumkotta too had fallen.

He knew that he would not be able to maintain a sustained second defense. So the Dewan changed tactics. He believed that if he could keep the Mysore army at bay till the South West Monsoon hit the coast, they might have a chance. The river was known to break and flood its banks in the monsoon, which could prove helpful. He also built temporary bunds upstream on the river.

And when the monsoon arrived in all its sudden fury, as expected, the levels rose, taking Tipu, who was unaware of this fact, by surprise. The bunds also breached and the waters flooded the banks catching Tipu and his men, who were in the middle of an assault, totally unprepared. He could neither cross nor stay. The massive flooding destroyed his gunpowder and rendered his guns useless. Many of his men drowned.

Meanwhile, all the Malabar States, including Cochin, shrugged off their payment of Tributes to Tipu, declared themselves independent, and hastened to Dharma Raja's aid. They also entered into an alliance with the British who already had a treaty with Travancore (Treaty of Mangalore) which called upon the British to defend Travancore in case of an attack. Although the British had not helped during the first attack, Lord Cornwallis now came to Travancore's help. He declared war on Mysore and set out to attack Tipu's capital, Seringapatnam, with the combined forces of Hyderabad and the Marathas. Thereby opening up another front.

Although his men had begun dying of malaria, cholera and small pox, and food supplies too had become scanty

and erratic, Tipu perhaps believed he could wait it out till the waters receded to retry taking Travancore. But with this attack imminent, he had no choice. He abandoned his siege of Travancore and rushed back to defend his capital.

The Third Anglo Mysore war as it is known was continued near Mysore and Tipu was comprehensively defeated by the combined forces. Forced to cede the entire west coast among other territories to the allies (Treaty of Seringapatnam 1792), Tipu's Malabar reign of terror came to a welcome end. And Travancore once again emerged victorious. But from being an independent ally of the British, it now became a protectorate and had to bear the entire cost of the war.

Tipu Sultan has been hailed as a master strategist, a brave soldier, a brilliant leader and freedom fighter. He introduced a coinage system when coins were unheard of, and a system of weights and measures where there was none. He was a poet and a linguist, well versed in Urdu, Kannada, Persian, French, English

and Arabic. He was an able administrator and a great architect. He achieved fame for his artillery and was the innovator of the world's first rockets. He had the guile, the courage and the confidence to take on the British and defeat them.

A large fort referred to as 'Kota Maidaan' still exists in Palghat where life goes on, I presume, as it did three centuries ago when it was built by Tipu. It houses the district jail and a few government offices with British overtones. The main market here is known as Sultanpet to this day as is the one in Wayanad. Known as Sultan's Batherri, it housed his battery. So vast was Tipu's influence that all over erstwhile Malabar, there are many Tipu reminders everywhere even today.

In spite of all this, his religious fervour drove him to massive conversion sprees, and suffice it to say that eventually, his military acumen and prowess failed to work for him in the taking of Travancore from 'that cursed Raman Nair', and Kerala survived.



#### Crossword solution

##### Across:

1 Juxtaposition 8 Stamp 9 Ibsen 10 Llano 11 Issue 13 Metro 15 Imbue 16 Fillip 18 Adapt 21 Radii 23 Rouse 24 Ivana 25 Nomad 26 Nonattendance

##### Down:

1 Wafer 2 Xrays 3 Ample 4 Oxtail 5 Idiom 6 Inset 7 Noncompliance 12 Usurp 14 Eel 17 Tousle 19 Again 20 Trait 21 Redid 22 Demon

# FICTION

## Care Package

Shawn Campbell

Shawn was born and raised in Oregon, USA. He works as an economist. He spends his leisure time enjoying the outdoors, photography, and writing.

Larry Hunt opened his door and walked into the brisk fall morning air. The trees on his block were vibrant. Reds, yellows, and oranges outnumbered the few patches of green that remained. Fallen leaves littered the yards and sidewalks. The day was chilly, not yet cold, but there was a noticeable drop from the high heat of the summer months. Larry shivered and zipped up his fleece. The hair on the back of his arms clung to his sleeves as his arms moved beneath them. The air was dry, full of static.

Larry shivered again and clutched the envelope more tightly against his body. The letter-sized envelope was yellow and heavy duty; a forever stamp graced by Madame Curie stuck to its upper right corner. A clumsily scribbled address, as if written by the wrong hand, stretched across the centre. No return address. The envelope could not come back. Larry stepped off his stoop and began his eight block walk to the mailbox. The weight of the envelope was both a comfort and a curse. There was no way he could lose track of such a hefty envelope. He held it so tight that its edge cut into his palm. The envelope felt heavier in his hand than the thirty notes inside.

The morning sun peaked through the

branches over Larry's head, its blinding light intermittently shaded by the trees along the street. Oaks, elms, maples, they all provided the same comfort, the same assurance of not being completely trapped in a world of concrete and cruelty. Sidewalks that must have been flat when built, now rose up like rolling hills in a meadow, pushed heavenward by the slow and tireless heaving of the roots beneath. It was a quiet morning, few people around, no one to watch his sojourn. No one to see him shake, pulsed by tiny vibrations of anxiety.

"Of course it has to be cash, you damn fool. Do you think these are the kind of people who want you to send a cashier's check? They want you to know nothing about them and they want to know nothing about you. That's how it works."

Teddy's tone had been patronising. Teddy, a long time drinking buddy who enjoyed Miller Lite in tallboy cans. Teddy, a Dale Earnhardt look alike who would be unnoticeable if he didn't look so out of place everywhere he went. Teddy, the man who knew how to take care of things when things needed to get done.

Larry shifted his focus back to the world around him. He couldn't let himself think too much about what he was doing. It was crazy. If he thought too

much about it, he would lose his nerve. He would probably turn around and walk back to his house, and that would solve nothing. It was better to distract himself. Better to catalogue and analyse the world around him, rather than the memories and thoughts inside his head.

Old Mr. Cavanaugh worked in his front lawn, raking up the few leaves that had already fallen. The old man had worked in a factory back when people still worked in factories. He had finally retired on the insistence of his wife. Old man Cavanaugh had once said that he considered it the biggest mistake of his life. He had been working his entire life, it had not made sense to quit just because the reaper was closing in. The old man stopped his early morning raking just long enough to wave hello to Larry and exchange pleasantries. Larry returned them but did not stop walking. He did not want Cavanaugh to see the cold beads of sweat that covered his brow.

Life had been simple in the Navy. They told you to get up, you got up. They told you to eat, you ate. They told you to shit, you shat. Every part of one's life had been directed, out of one's control. Every minute was timed and planned. One did not have to think in the Navy. There had been something comforting about having absolutely no control. Something nice about being just one cog in a much larger organism. Larry missed the Navy. Larry wished he had stayed on, like some of his friends had. But that time had come and gone. The greatest comforts had seemed like the worst prison at the time. Larry shook his head as he walked. There was no use dwelling on things

three years past.

Cross a street, turn and look both ways, childhood drills that never really go away. There were no cars. No one in their right mind would be out so early on a Sunday morning, though the neighbourhood would slowly come alive. People walking in their Sunday best, the smell of frying bacon, the laughter and pounding feet of children as they rushed down stairwells. Soon the place would be like an old Folger's commercial. But not yet. At that moment, all was still quiet. Just the soft breeze moving tree branches like the skeletal hands of death rubbing together in anticipation. The tinkling of wind chimes played a sad melody in the crisp air.

"This has to be taken care of. This is not something that can be ignored," Teddy had been insistent, and he was right. This was something that could not be ignored. "I'll take care of this. I know some people, people back east, people who know about garbage."

There was no doubt that Teddy knew about these things. Teddy knew people. Teddy was quiet about his work, he rarely talked about it unless coaxed with friendly words and offers to buy a couple more rounds. Larry had heard him talk about work only a few times during the long years of their friendship. Teddy worked for himself, but himself worked for the government.

"Like a contractor, you know, someone who knows how to get in touch with the right people to get your house built."

Another street. Larry started across. Before his first step hit the ground, he heard the frantic ringing of a bell and



a bellow of warning. Adrenaline rush. Larry looked up and dodged just in time as a bike whizzed past him. Its rider, a pinched faced twelve year old, his local team baseball cap worn backwards, had a large bag of Sunday papers hanging from his shoulder. The boy turned to curse at Larry as he sped away. Larry did not recognize him, he was not the neighbourhood's paper boy. Probably passing through on his way to his own delivery area. Larry waited to let his beating heart slow, then continued walking. How had he let himself get so distracted? He needed to stay focused. He needed to keep his mind clear.

"Be sure to take care of Amy, always watch out for Amy."

That is what Larry imagined his mother would have told him, if she could have, before she slipped away forever. It had been his mother's mantra when he was a child, beaten into him by its repetitiveness. His mother had been gone for two years, but it still drummed inside his head.

"You must protect your sweet innocent sister."

It was not something he could question, it was just a fact of life. It didn't matter that Amy wasn't really sweet or innocent. He had been born the older brother, and that was what older brothers did.

Amy had been a stubborn child, no one could ever tell her what to do. It took all of their mother's strength just to force her through college, so she could have a real job, a real life, not be like her mother. Not that Amy looked anything like their mother. Their mother had been dark-haired, short, homely and subdued. Amy was blonde, tall, loud, and a looker.

There was one thing she had in common with their mother. She was undeniably attracted to losers. The line-up of boyfriends Larry remembered from high school was of a kind. Kids who thought they were big shit because they had nice cars and nice clothes. The kind of guys who wrapped their arms around a woman like they were giving her a headlock. The kind who thought they were the centre of the world.

It was too bad. Amy had been obnoxious at times, but caring. She had always just wanted someone to care back. Larry cared, and their mother had cared, but it wasn't what she was looking for. Larry could understand, it was different when the person wasn't obligated. That had always been their mother's problem too. It had to have been hard for her, lonely, raising two kids on her own. She had done the best she could, but had always craved what she had been denied. Their mother had been desperate to be in love. Amy hadn't had a good role model.

When Larry came back from the Navy to live with and take care of their mother, he discovered that Amy hadn't really changed. Yes, she had grown into a beautiful, confident woman. Yes, she had a good job at a marketing firm. Yes, she had a fancy apartment in a posh neighbourhood. Yes, she had a nice car. But the losers stayed. A reminder that perhaps the sophistication was only a veneer. The cracks still existed in her psyche.

A car drove slowly up the street from behind him. For the briefest of moments, Larry had an uncomfortable feeling that the driver was watching him, following

him. He refused to turn his head to look behind him. He was just being paranoid. Nobody could know, nobody had any idea. Well, nobody but Teddy, but Teddy could be trusted. The car drove by up the street, neither speeding up nor slowing down. A dusty blue four-door Hyundai Excel, with a fat middle-aged dark woman at the wheel in Sunday dress and hat. Larry chuckled to himself at his own paranoia, but he quickened his pace as he crossed another street.

Soon his chore would be done. He just needed to hold himself together and control his thoughts for a little longer. Larry tried not to dwell on the delivery of his envelope. He tried not to think too hard about what it contained. One step after another. Each bringing him one step closer. Study the cracks on the sidewalk, watch the clouds blow across a slowly brightening sky, think about the breakfast that would be made when he got back home. Eggs, sausage, pancakes, a big glass of orange juice. Look at the world. Think about whatever you want. Just don't think about what you're doing.

"Everything will be taken care of, don't worry about it, there's nothing to worry about."

Teddy had told him that so many times that he had actually started believing it. He had never liked Nick. There was something about him that just made one instantly dislike him. Something you couldn't explain. A disquiet in one's gut. Amy had been dating Nick for a year. From the very first time Nick had shaken his hand, squeezing harder than Larry just to show he could, Larry had known that Nick was nothing but trouble.

Nick was an ex-Marine, not big, but imposing. He was a good looking guy. His haircut was still the classic jarhead shave. He tended to wear sports jackets over tight jeans and a tight shirt. There was something in the way he moved, something that went beyond being self-assured, to being cocky. When he talked to you, he stared you right in the eye, never averting his gaze. He made Larry uncomfortable as hell. He made Amy swoon.

Larry had tried to like Nick for Amy's sake. He just couldn't. There was something off about the guy. Larry had followed his gut and checked with some old friends in the military. The prognosis had not been good. Before joining the Marines, Nick had been a troublemaker; he'd hung out with the wrong crowd, been involved in drug using and dealing. Nick had continued to get in trouble several more times while he was in service. Larry had tried to tell Amy. She had laughed, pulling her hair away from her face in that way she had. Nick had told her all about it. Nick was a changed man. Larry had gotten in plenty of trouble himself when he was younger, but that didn't make him a bad guy.

Larry tried to like Nick again. He told himself that Amy was right, people did change. Larry was not the same person he once was. Nick had gone into the Marines for many of the same reasons Larry had gone into the Navy. Larry tried having more one on one time with Nick, to get to know him better. He even took him out for drinks one time with Teddy. Teddy hung around for half an hour and then excused himself to go home. The

next time they met, Teddy was short.

"You need to get rid of that guy."

A bird flew in front of Larry, startling him out of the depths of his mind. It rushed by in a flash of blue and landed on a low branch not far ahead, bursting out with a harsh chirp to greet the morning, perhaps chastising him for walking around at such an early hour. Larry stared at the bird as he walked by, studying its plumage, every facet and detail of it, as if trying to commit everything to memory. The bluebird studied him back, but did not find him as interesting, perhaps, and flew off. The bluebird was safe. The bluebird was good. The bluebird was not something Larry was afraid to think about. He wished it had stayed.

He hadn't been at the bar where it happened. He might not have known about it but for Leslie, Amy's friend and roommate. She was a perky, simple redhead, who worked as a secretary at the same marketing firm as Amy. She had seen Nick and Amy arguing. She had watched Nick get more and more frustrated. She had heard him raise his voice repeatedly. She wasn't sure what the tipping point had been. She had been walking back from the bathroom when she saw Nick grab Amy by the arm and Amy shake him off. Then the punch, straight to the face, Amy on the floor, Leslie and the other patrons in stunned silence. Nick had stormed off. A week later, a worried Leslie had called Larry.

Larry had tried to talk to Amy. She had scared the shit out of him. She was not leaving Nick. Nick had been under a lot of stress. It was really her fault. These things happened. Nick felt terrible about

it. It would never happen again. Excuses, excuses. Just like their mother used to make for their father, before he had left them permanently to go spread misery elsewhere. Larry hadn't known what to do. Amy wouldn't listen to reason. Nick was a big burly Marine. There was no way Larry could intimidate him.

Teddy had known what to do. Teddy didn't even hesitate to bring it up as soon as he heard the story. "There's ways to take care of these things," Teddy said, as they sat at Larry's dead mother's kitchen table sipping tallboys. "These things can be taken care of. You don't want to throw your life away for some piece of trash. Garbage men clean up trash. That's why we have garbage men."

Houses gave way to businesses, their doors and windows locked, slumbering until the start of the day. The big blue mailbox sat on the corner. Larry opened the hatch. He held the envelope in his hand but couldn't push it in. Absurd, sending the envelope through the mail! Larry looked at it. He could picture the contents in his mind. Three thousand dollars in cash, a picture, and a typed note, listing home address and favourite haunts. How could anyone fail to recognize what was in the envelope? How could anyone picking it up not know?

This surely wasn't the kind of thing you could just mail off for, like the decoder rings from the back of his childhood comic books. It all seemed too simple, too out in the open. Could this really be how it was done? Was there really some box in some post office where things like this were sent? Did some innocuous looking man come in to check the box

every day, walking past unknowing customers shipping packages and buying stamps? What about the name on the envelope? Surely it wasn't a real name, but could a fake person get a post office box? Was nobody checking? Was nobody watching?

The envelope was in Larry's hand, and his hand hovered over the mailbox. Maybe all his doubts were just in his head. Maybe his anxiety was just getting the better of him. Of course the contents of the envelope were obvious to him; he knew what was in it. Maybe this was the

way things were done, right out in the open, right under everybody's collective noses. It really didn't matter. Larry didn't have a choice. He could turn around, walk back to his house, and nothing would get done. But then what?

Larry dropped the precious envelope into the dark depths of the mailbox. It fell to the bottom with a satisfying thud. It was out of his hands. Larry felt a great weight lift from his shoulders. Whatever else happened now, it was out of his control.



## POETRY

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### Human

Vivek Sharma

Vivek's first book of verse was shortlisted for Muse India Young Writer Award 2011. His work in English and Hindi appears in several journals. Vivek is a Pushcart nominated poet, is published as a scientist, and he lives and teaches in Chicago.

Each time I settle into a rhythm, I turn  
break my habit, to the chaos return,  
forgetting not for long, how pattern  
is an asylum, it is easy to belong  
to the animal kingdom of instinct  
but to be human is to sing  
an ever evolving song.



# FICTION

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## The Beggar

Raghavendra Rao

Raghavendra is a paediatrician in Porterville, CA. He has authored two books and contributes health articles to a local newspaper, The Porterville Recorder. He is a member of Porterville Writers Group.

Ammma, anybody home? Krishnamma, a 50 year-old Brahmin lady, was dicing brinjals in the kitchen. Her husband, Srinivas, a teacher at the Municipal High School, had long since left for work. The urgency in the tone of the caller brought Krishnamma hurrying to the door, still holding a piece of the vegetable in one hand.

She opened the door to find a young village woman in a red cotton sari, standing on the stoop and wiping the tears from her face. Her hair was dishevelled, and her red eyes and slightly swollen lids indicated deep distress. She did not look like the usual beggar.

"Why are you crying?" Krishnamma asked.

"Ammma, kindly listen. My father is very sick. He may die in a day or two unless..." Her voice turned hoarse.

"Look, I know this story. I've kept the sambar on the stove. It will boil over. I'll get you a rupee. Take it and go."

"Ammma, I didn't come to beg. I don't want money. Please hear me. We live in the neighbouring village. My father has chest pains. He is not eating well and has high fevers at night. Around six months ago, he was bedridden with the same disease. A gypsy medicine-man was passing by our village then, and he gave

father tiny herbal balls and oils extracted from rare herbs from Himalayan jungles, just for ten rupees. The oil was for rubbing on the tummy. Within a week, father recovered and could easily walk five miles a day."

"Good, but why are you telling me all this?"

"Pardon me, Ammma. Father is sick again. My husband, I'm ashamed to say this, does not care and does not believe in herbs. Anyway, that's my karma," she sobbed.

"Calm down, woman. What's your name?"

"Ponni."

"Ponni, listen. Don't worry about your husband. I'll give you five rupees. Take your father to a Government hospital."

"Ammma, you are naïve. The Government hospital is one-way ticket to Yama-Loka. Not even in my dreams will I take anyone there."

"What will you do then?"

"I heard from my relatives that a medicine-man was going through your village, so I came here. I think he is the same person who had treated my father. Ammma, he is the best native doctor I have seen ever and he has a magic touch. Several of my friends have taken oils, tablets and creams from him and felt

better immediately. He has treated sugar disease, high blood pressure and swellings that even city doctors couldn't handle." Ponni lowered her voice. "Amma, he can cure diseases that come from man-woman relationships."

Krishnamma blushed. "We don't need such medicines."

"Pardon me for saying that, respected mother," Ponni bent and touched Krishnamma's feet with the utmost respect. "Have you seen this gypsy doctor in this village?"

"No, Ponni."

"It's my bad karma again. Amma, God bless you."

Ponni walked down the lane to talk to another woman.

After dinner that evening, Krishnamma, with a silver plate full of betel leaves, betel nut pieces, and a little lime paste, joined her husband on the veranda. They relaxed, as was usual, on an old reed-mat, chit-chatting. The place was dimly lit by an oil hurricane lantern turned low.

Fragrance from the nearby jasmines filled the air.

Krishnamma picked up a tender betel leaf, peeled off the central vein, applied a dash of lime paste and placed a few pieces of betel nut on the leaf. She gingerly folded it to make a small packet and handed it to her husband. He put it in his mouth and chewed with contentment.

"Very good, Krishna. What's new?"

"Let me tell you what I did this afternoon. A medicine-man passed by and I heard he had rare herbal remedies for several ailments. I bought a few tablets and oils from him."

"Really?"

"Yes. Let me show you."

Krishnamma went into the kitchen and returned with a small metal box. She took several tablets and tiny oil bottles from the box.

"These red pills are for indigestion. The brown ones are for constipation. To use this large tablet, you have to rub it on the floor with a spoonful of water. The resulting paste is a sure cure for chest pain."

"What about the oils?"

"The red oil is for joint and muscle pains, and the green one keeps one's head cool. I bought the green one especially for you."

"Do you believe all these will work?"

"Yes, I do. I've first hand evidence for it."

Krishnamma explained to her husband about Ponni's visit that morning, her father's illness and the gypsy doctor's cure in detail. "This afternoon, I could not believe my eyes to see this medicine man walking by, carrying a huge bag on his shoulders, announcing remedies for various diseases. I called him and bought these pills and oils. Radha, our neighbour, bought several pills as well, and so did Vasanthi from the house opposite. Dear, shall I rub this oil over your calves? You always complain of leg pain."

Srinivas stretched his legs, scrawny from years of walking to the school and back. Krishnamma took a teaspoonful of red oil and rubbed it vigorously over her husband's knees and calves. "Better?"

"Ha, yes. Feels good. Tell me, was this crying woman, Ponni, wearing a red sari?"

“Yes. How do you know? Did she talk to you too?”

“No. While walking back from school this evening, I saw the woman with the red sari and the gypsy with the big bag

some distance away. They were laughing and joking while eating food under a neem tree. I think they are husband and wife, Krishni. What a clever way to do business!”



## POETRY

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### Red Bus II

Shelton Pinheiro

Shelton lives in Kochi. Loves fish. Reads and writes poetry and short fiction. Has published in journals. Works in advertising. Is not working on a novel.

Inside red buses  
in the city,  
the monsoon,  
uncivil,  
having had its way  
across the Arabian Sea  
blows through  
the fettered tarpaulin covers  
of the rusty wet window  
uncovering, for a moment,  
forgotten old men  
in the corners of dampness  
dreaming of marigolds  
since which war, famine or quake  
who knows.



# FICTION

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## Once Upon A Time

Shivika Mathur

Once upon a time, I began, and I could see her eyes start glittering with wonder, metamorphosing into black pearls floating in a sea of white. Was there an ancient magic in those words, ‘once upon a time’? Was it the magnetism of the stories or was it the act of story telling that drew her into a vortex of limitless imagination, who knew? I continued the fable of the ogre and the maiden... beauty and beast took countless forms and shapes as I exhaled them. I thought I saw them dancing in her eyes.

“Is it the power of beauty? Can love really change someone’s form? How does it feel if no one loves you?” Annie asked me after some silent minutes of rumination as she gazed at the star lit false ceiling. She had raised a hue and cry when she had first seen the luminescent star stickers glowing from a ceiling at her friend’s place.

The real moon hung low, almost peeping into Annie’s room, lamenting, perhaps, its displacement by cheap artifice.

A big hall, illumined by a low hanging chandelier, bedazzling yet colourless, a burnished throne, a hazy female form. The mauve gown, topped by a cascade

Shivika teaches English Literature at Indraprastha College for Women, Delhi. Her areas of interest are creative and academic writing, academic research and blogging.

of lustrous golden brown come closer... Annie woke up with a visible shudder and somewhat agitated. The beauty and the beast had perhaps amalgamated.

I would choose stories carefully, keeping in mind the fragility of an eight year old girl. But what could I know of how my stories permeated the labyrinth of Annie’s mind, discovering delicate crevices and lodging tactically in the folds of her subconscious. There they awaited a new lease of life, even a transmogrification, nurtured by both imagination and banal reality. It was here that the real meaning of my stories unfurled and revealed itself to Annie, breaking through the surface in her dreams. Annie navigated her gentle wiry subconscious every night while the beauties of the fairyland waited for their salvation in the clear light of the day.

“Who... um what is sleeping beauty?”

“One who wakes up with a kiss or one who is forever kissed into inaction?” I didn’t say that loud.

Shuttling between truth and fiction, the incandescent tales of Snow White, the Sleeping Beauty, the petite Red Riding Hood, poor Cinderella, and long-haired Rapunzel, sold the virtues of patience, suffering, beauty, faith, perseverance, and



obedience, promising a handsome prince in reward... all of it endorsed by society as the staple diet of a growing female child.

I was aware of the conflict in my mind as I narrated these stories to Annie and I balked at transmitting it into hers. I reflected on the stories that shaped my childhood, a little less ornate maybe, but replete with moral allusions.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't."

"Who is Mark Twain?"

I wonder what to narrate today, the story of the eve teased woman, or

the one taunted forever for her wheat coloured skin or acid burns? The 'good touch bad touch' advertisement plays on repeat in my mind. Should I tell her the story of the childhood-deprived ten year old or of the disenchanted twenty year old or of the unborn daughter? Or closer home, the story of the neighbour's maid's young daughter who works houses in the day and studies at night... or that of a mother who sells illusions to her daughter every day. There is no dearth of stories... but ah, why do I freeze like Rashid, the storyteller, as soon as I open my mouth?

Should this starry ceiling be fortified or broken down? I wonder...

"Listen, little Elia: draw your chair up close to the edge of the precipice and I'll tell you a story."

~ F Scott Fitzgerald

## Reading Hour

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# last page

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By the time the house was ready for interior decoration, money was running out and tempers were running thin. The architect had flown abroad. The primary contractor was miffed that the carpenters belonged to a different contractor. Multiple agencies, he swore prophetically, spelled disaster.

Sure enough, somebody (with multiple agencies in the picture, it was always 'somebody') cracked one of the granite slabs meant for the kitchen counter. The resulting gap had to be bridged with a new piece, leaving an unseemly line, where cooking debris would lodge over the years.

Despite eagle-eyed supervision, the floor tiles with the manufacturing defect ended up in the most visible part of the drawing room floor. Then 'someone' broke the beautiful stained glass piece embedded in the bathroom door, a piece that had been carefully designed to match the ornamental wall tile inside. The electrician said the carpenter did it. The carpenter said it was the electrician, whose team was doing the bathroom switches. By the time a replacement was ordered, the lady who had done the original had disappeared, so a newspaper was stuck over the gap. The switches themselves, very spiffy to begin with, were from a little known company that was to close down a year later and cause the switches, whose springs deteriorated rather rapidly post-warranty, to be replaced by those of another brand, creating a mismatched look on the walls.

The architect had placed pretty, road-facing window boxes on the upper floor, with no way to access them for planting, watering or weeding. Every monsoon, a variety of grasses would spring up in the boxes and dry out once the rains did, leaving straggly bits of brown leering at the road for months after.

Curtain and upholstery shopping began to

take its toll on the marriage. *Décor* magazines borrowed from the library helped, and the sofa was designed from a photograph in one of them, of the living room of someone's New England farmhouse. But the magazines also threw up considerations that had not been under consideration before – such as how to choose wall colours for a room to match its purpose, how to match tile with wall, wall with window, window with curtain, curtain with upholstery, upholstery with light fittings. The tile and fittings shop salesperson became almost like family. He would arrange combinations of Spanish, Italian, Portuguese tiles in ochre and earth colours, while tea was served in little cups and stress levels escalated over each new decision.

The carpenter and his team enjoyed setting up home in the newly built house. They sawed and planed, nailed and hammered, upstairs and downstairs, for months. Veneers were tried and discarded, handles matched and unmatched, cabinets made and remade, until come housewarming, the carpenters-turned-squatters had to be bodily evicted.

It had taken two years to complete. There were but two who were to live there, finally. 1500 square feet of 'built up' per head. When the house help went on holiday, every square foot was painfully one too many.

Meanwhile, unseen, efficient, unencumbered by architect, contractor, plumber or any other agency, the little red-whiskered bulbul had, three seasons running, built its tiny cup nest of woven twigs in the shrubbery, successfully wooed a mate, reared its young, and then abandoned the nest itself without a backward glance once its purpose was served. Using no other resource than what was freely available, occupying exactly as many inches as necessary, no more, no less, and uprooting neither tree nor one other living creature for its home; a home that vanished into the earth as quietly as it had sprung from it once it was empty.

But we're the civilised ones.